

# 空ろの箱と 零のマリア4

御影瑛路

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### Iroha Shindou

A brilliant girl who is the president of the student council. During the endgame of 'Kingdom Royale', she establishes a system that places her at the top of the heap.

### Koudai Kamiuchi

Appears to be superficial and frivolous, but actually possesses many hidden talents. In the endgame of 'Kingdom Royale', his hidden side allows him to make a surprising move.

### Daiya Oomine

A silver-haired student with multiple piercings; his tongue is as sharp as his wits. In the endgame of 'Kingdom Royale', he is willing to cooperate with Kazuki, who is in turn trying to stop Iroha.

There's nothing you can do to qualify to be the king. If you want to become king, just go ahead and try. If you think you're ready, just go for it. But you still won't be able to pull it off. None of you guys has got what it takes to bear the burden of other people's lives. All of you already have your hands full with your own lives. Not only do you lack the resolve to bear such responsibility, you don't even understand what it means. You're inexperienced, weak, and self-centered. Aah, man, you guys are just too unreliable!

Hmph, all right, looks like I'll have to become the king.

—Iroha Shindou

More than anyone else, I'm aware of my own impotence.

Even though I have literally sweated blood in pursuit of my goals, I didn't become who I wanted to be, but instead found myself deviating further and further from my ideals.

I'm so weak that I can't protect myself. I have no choice but to find someone to be my protector.

I'll deceive everyone in order to do so.

### Yuuri Yanagi


Shy, well-behaved, and as cute as a kitten, yet as brilliant as Iroha. In the endgame of 'Kingdom Royale', she is forced to remain passive because her true nature has come to light.

But even if my actions break my heart, I have no right to grieve. After all, I'm an abhorrent sinner. That's why I just can't believe it: Why would you want to protect me after I deceived you this entire time?

To be honest, I'm a little regretful!

If I had known you were so kind, I would have entrusted myself to you from the very beginning.

—Yuuri Yanagi



I don't need "that."  
I don't need something that warms my very core.  
In order to become a 'box', I sank to the bottom of the sea where I numbed my body  
so that I would no longer feel the bitter cold. If I were to taste the warmth once more,  
all my efforts to remain numb would be for naught.  
Therefore, anyone who tries to give "that" back to me is my enemy.

*Hey, Kazuki.*  
We are enemies, aren't we?

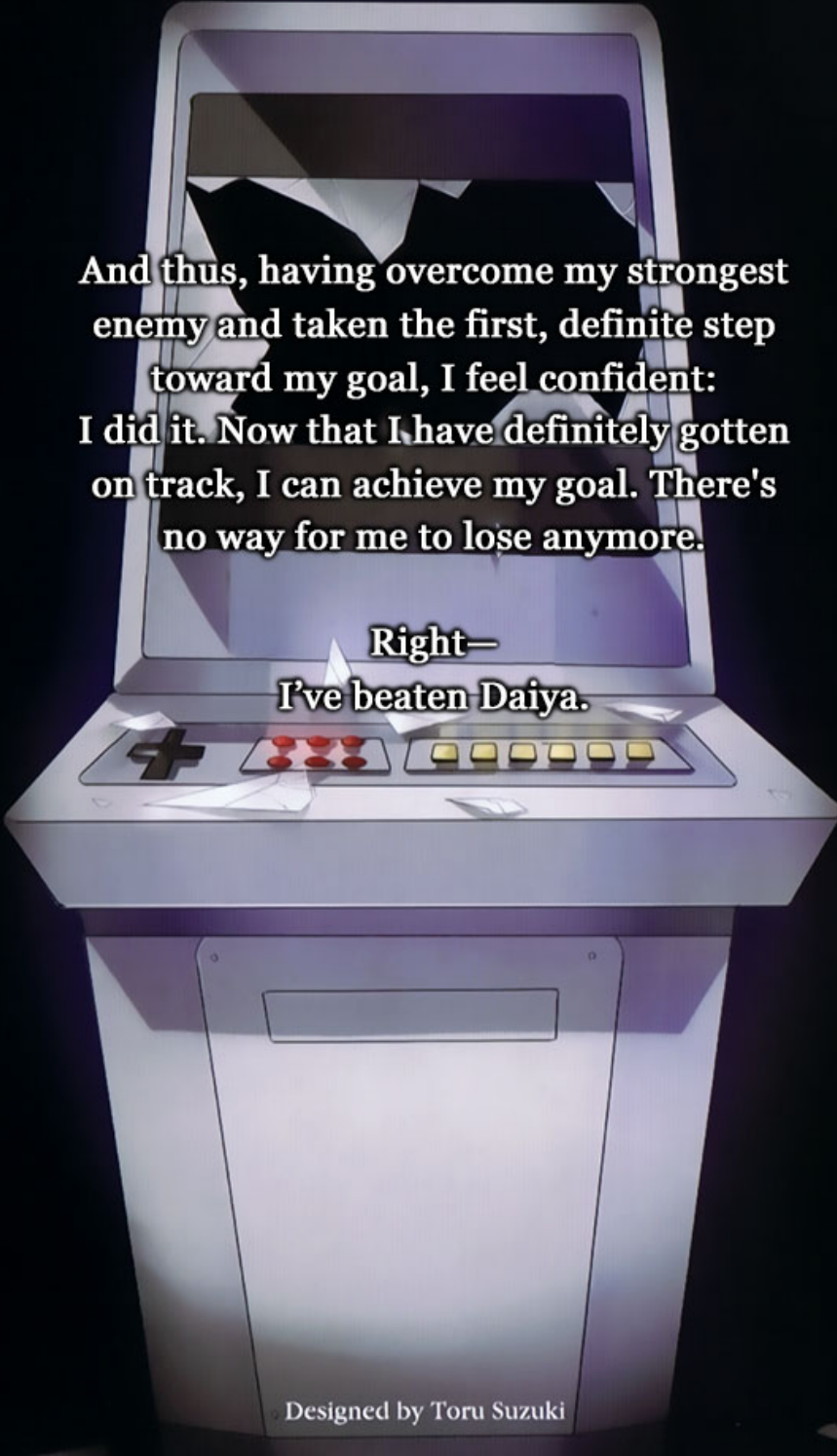
—Maria Otonashi

### Maria Otonashi

A resolute beauty who pursues 'O'. She is adept in the art of self-defense, but her extreme idealism keeps her from hurting others. In the endgame of 'Kingdom Royale', her treatment of Kazuki takes on an unexpected shift.

### Kazuki Hoshino

An ordinary boy who is abnormally fond of his everyday life; he is being observed by 'O'. In the endgame of 'Kingdom Royale', he finally discovers a way to beat the game—but his solution is not flawless.



And thus, having overcome my strongest enemy and taken the first, definite step toward my goal, I feel confident: I did it. Now that I have definitely gotten on track, I can achieve my goal. There's no way for me to lose anymore.

Right—  
I've beaten Daiya.



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«Yaa yaa yaa - What's up? - I am Noitan - the much-loved - cute mascot - of [Kingdom Royale]!»

«Huh? - You are wOndering - why suCh an - outstanding persOnality -like me is here? - Eehm - I thOught - I will explain - [Kingdom Royale] to you - piTiful guys - whose memory - is about as gOod - as a chiCken's! - Although you - lowlives coUld - easily be mistaken - for the oriGin - of the word 'idiot' - I am kiNd to you! - I am the maScot - after all»

«Alright - I wiLl - begin now!»

«To be frAnk - [Kingdom Royale] is a game - about killiNg - and deceiving - each other»

«The six players - get their own - [classes] and - have to mEet - their respective - victory cOnditions. - I will now - disPlay the [classes] - and the victOry conditions!»

## Game Explanation



### [King]

*Victory conditions:* Death of the [Prince] and [Revolutionary]



### [Prince]

*Victory conditions:* Death of the [King], [The Double] and [Revolutionary]



### [The Double]

*Victory conditions:* Death of the [Prince] and [Revolutionary]



### [Sorcerer]

*Victory conditions:* Surviving



### [Knight]

*Victory conditions:* Death of the [King] and [Prince]



### [Revolutionary]

*Victory conditions:* Death of the [King], [Prince] and [The Double]

«The game ends - once evERYone's - victory conditions - have beEn met! - Put another way - the gAME won't - end just by - cLEaring one's own - victory conditions - For exaMple - if you are the [King] - and both the - [Prince] and thE [Revolutionary] - died - the game will not - end as lONG as - the [Knight] - who still aims - for yOUR life - is alive»

«Therefore - someone deFinitely - has to start killing.»

«Huh? How to kill? All players get a knife, so simply start to slaughter each other.»

«Hah? You can't do something like that? Go kill yourself you fool! Don't you get that mankind's a beautiful race that can slaughter each other even without any meaningful goal!»

«Ethics? Ah, you're talking about that ambiguous thing that changes along with the environment. You can't kill because of that? It makes me sick but I have to admit that may be true. Don't worry! [Kingdom Royale] is prepared so that even wimps like you can kill each other! We kindly implemented a system that lets you kill someone by simply pressing a button.»

«.....»

«Mh? I am - not angRy! - Uhm - I will now - explain - the skills - of eAch [class] - including the skills - to kill others»

## Game Explanation

### **Skills of the [King]**

#### **- [Murder]**

He can select a player he wants to kill and request the [Sorcerer] or the [Knight] to execute this action. He does not need to select.

#### **- [Substitution]**

He can once avoid being the target of [Assassination] by changing roles with [The Double] for a single day. If he was selected as the target on this day, [The Double] will die instead of the [King].

### **Skills of the [Prince]**

#### **- [Throne Succession]**

He becomes able to use [Murder] once the [King] and [The Double] died.

#### **- [Anti-magic]**

He cannot be killed by [Sorcery].

### **Skills of [The Double]**

#### **- [Inheritance]**

If the [King] dies or [Substitution] was executed, he becomes able to use [Murder].

### **Skills of the [Sorcerer]**

#### **- [Sorcery]**

He can choose whether to effectively kill the character that was selected by [Murder]. The targeted character will become a burnt corpse.

### **Skills of the [Knight]**

#### **- [Deathblow]**

He can choose whether to effectively kill the character that was selected by [Murder]. Only executable when the [Sorcerer] is dead. The targeted character will die due to beheading.

### **Skills of the [Revolutionary]**

#### **- [Assassination]**

He can assassinate the selected character. He does not need to select one. The targeted character will become a strangulated corpse.

«Basically - the mightier the sKills - the higher the risk - one bears - Therefore you canNot - call any [class] - advantageous.»

«I will now - explain the - timetable of this gAme - which is surprisingly - important»

## Game Explanation

~12

**<A>**

- Break, standby in own room

12~14

**<B>**

- Gathering in the big room

14~18

**<C>**

- Selection of [Secret Meeting] partner until 14:40. Spend 30 minutes in the room of the selected character.
- The [King] is able to select a target for [Murder].
- The [Sorcerer] can use [Sorcery] (the [Knight] can use [Deathblow]). (The character that was targeted by [Sorcery] or [Deathblow] will die at 17:55)

18~20

**<D>**

- Gathering in the big room.

20~22

**<E>**

- Dinner in own room.  
(If no food supply available, death by turning into a mummy)
- The [Revolutionary] can use [Assassination].  
(The character that was targeted by [Assassination] will immediately die)

22~

**<F>**

- Break, sleep

«Use this table - to plan the tiMing - of various actions!»

«Ah right - there is still - someThing I have - to tell you»

«Actually - [Kingdom Royale] is a gAme - that is being played - by one after the oTher - When you are the player - the otHers are - just NPCs - and will not - really die when - you kIll them! - Isn't that great? - You can kill - at ease - You can enjoy - the game.»

«Eh? You can still - not enjoy the game - even thOUGH - the others are NPCs?»

«What is an incapable piece of trash like you who spent a boring life and wouldn't even get an article on Yahoo News when dying saying? Entrust your body to your lust and savor each moment of this enjoyment! That just suits someone like you who can hardly be distinguished from a hog!»

«.....»

«Just joking ☆! Did I - surprise yOu? Noitan is everyone's - dear masCot - so I would - never think - like that ☆»

«Well then - please enJoy [Kingdom Royale]!»

I'm in a scene I can only remember in my dreams.

"To be honest, I'm not pleased with this development."

I still don't know what kind of face he has, even though I should have become used to seeing him by now.

"Ironically, this development was called forth by Daiya Oomine-kun, even though he's supposed to be your enemy. ...No, maybe it's more accurate to say that he did so *because* he's your enemy."

But even while saying such things, he (she?) is still smiling, full of composure. He's disgusting as always.

"Your goal and mine resemble one another after all."

Goal?

This word makes me suspicious. He didn't seem to have a goal; rather, it seemed as though he had just been playing with us.

So I won't believe that. Isn't it rather the opposite? Hasn't he always tried to destroy the everyday life I've been trying to preserve?

"If it were like that, would I have really helped you destroy the 'box' when your body was taken over?"

You did that just in order to observe me, didn't you?

“Hehe... that’s just a pastime for me and not my goal. No, maybe you could say that having such a pastime itself is my goal.”

I don’t get what your goal ultimately is.

“But isn’t it the same for you? You, too, are saying something ambiguous like wanting to preserve your everyday life. Is that a clear goal?”

I’ve unknowingly closed my mouth.

“Because it’s hard to understand, it’s also hard to maintain. Therefore, I truly respect Daiya-kun for making use of that weak point of yours! Even so, I think that your nature won’t change yet!”

While his cryptic choice of words increases my level of irritation, I ask for their basis, but...

“If you were such a simple human, I wouldn’t be able to notice you like this.”

He continues, still smiling.

“Daiya-kun told you that you are «an existence that tramples others’ wishes», right? I think he’s perfectly right! His accurateness is truly interesting, really. But that is just a one-sided way of perceiving you. I think that answer lacks something. You are an existence that tramples down others’ wishes---”

He says to me with a triumphant look.

“But you can also be an existence that grants someone’s wish.”

*An irritating smell like diluent is in the air.*

## Prologue

*A harmful smell that causes delusions and breaks people. But one also becomes addicted to this smell.*

*This is a pleasant space, like a sauna that was built just for me. But it's not pleasant in the sense of comfortable.*

*It's a space in which I can easily consume my life.*

*My life gets consumed before my very eyes. In a shape that's as easy to understand as the balance in a bankbook that's approaching 0 at high speed.*

*Aah... this feels good.*

*Consuming is a pleasure after all. People who suffer from shopping addiction don't actually want to have new things; they just calm themselves down by spending money. Although they know they're only ruining themselves, they can't get away from the pleasure of consuming.*

*This 'box' is the same.*

*It may sound paradoxical, but I attain pleasure and a sense of security by putting my life at risk, by consuming it.*

*Is this foolish?*

*I bet it is. But I don't care. No matter what kind of life we spend, eventually we all get thrown into some retirement home and end up getting our asses wiped by some annoyed nurse. If that's what awaits us, it's much better to seek pleasure than a meaningless life of pain for our endeavors. Or am I wrong?*

*While not actually caring about any of these musings, I recall the inhuman guy who gave me this 'box'.*

***"Do you have a wish?"***

*I immediately realized that he was abnormal in some way. I can't even recall his gender; well, I didn't care about that to begin with. But that abnormality of his was more than enough to stimulate my curiosity.*

*I think I answered him with something like «I can't think of any wish, but this world is awfully boring». When I said that, he flashed a mysterious smile and held out a 'box'.*

*I immediately understood that it really would grant any 'wish'.*

*I reflexively pondered whether I wanted it or not, but I didn't come to a clear conclusion. In the end, I accepted it lightheartedly, thinking that I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. It was like accepting a free pack of tissues advertising some prep school.*

*While I pretended to listen to his explanations, I thought about pre-ordering a game I had seen that day in that week's Famitsu because it looked funny.*

*But then I imagined a game that seemed even funnier.*

*So I thought: "Why not go with that idea?"*

*And thus the 'Game of Idleness' was born; just so I could play a game called 'Kingdom Royale'. It took the place of an unreleased video game.*

*Alright, then.*

*"I will win against you, Daiya!"*

*Kazuki Hoshino said that.*

*I couldn't help but laugh out loud.*

*"Absolutely impossible."*

*I am confident. Kazuki Hoshino has no chance of achieving his goal.*

## Prologue



GAME START



Iroha Shindou



Maria Otonashi



Kazuki Hoshino



Daiya Oomine



Koudai Kamiuchi



Yuuri Yanagi

►First Day <A> [Kazuki Hoshino]'s room

---\*crinch\*

Crush. Transparent hands reach into my body and crush my organs. I'm getting crushed, minced, shrunk - in order to fit into this game. I feel my whole body rotating dizzily as if I were thrown into a washing machine along with some clothing.

While bearing the physiological unpleasantness of such an experience, I become as transparent as those hands. I become as light as if I've lost my entire body, and slowly open the eyes that I unknowingly closed.

The first thing that enters my sight is a blank concrete ceiling and a naked light bulb that hangs from it.

My heart speeds up.

Once again I've been placed in this prison-like room.

...no, that's not quite correct. To be precise, it's the first time that I've truly come here. I'm going to fight a battle in which I really cannot make a single mistake.

I recall the promise I made with Daiya.

«You can survive if nobody kills anyone during those eight days.»

«And---if you can bring about that kind of ending, I will destroy the 'Game of Idleness'. That's the 'fairness' you've been talking about, right?»

My goal is to crush the ‘box’, save Maria, and return to the real world.

We could solve the ‘Rejecting Classroom’ and the ‘Sevennight in Mud’ by finding their respective ‘owners’ and persuading them to hand over their ‘boxes’. But that won’t work this time. Daiya, the ‘owner’ of the ‘Game of Idleness’, cannot be persuaded.

Therefore I can’t persuade him; I have to win a match against him.

I’m supposed to lead the group so that no one will kill anyone else. I’m supposed to reach an end where nobody dies.

I look around. Just like last time, I see a toilet and a washbasin in this small room. Furthermore, there’s a roughly 20-inch monitor, a table, and a jute bag on top of the table.

The contents of the bag are the same as well. A ball-point pen, a memo book, a blue watch, seven portions of solid food, a portable device and a knife.

However---

«PleaSed to - meEt you»

The disgusting green bear, Noitan, greets me like that this time.

---‘Pleased to meet you’, huh.

It feels sorta awkward, but it is the correct greeting. I may feel like I've met him several times already, but actually it's our first true meeting. Only my NPCs, my copies, have met him thus far. I have only seen this meeting before in the form of a [vicarious experience].

«Gufufu - PleaSed to - meEt you - Kazuki-kun - Alright - you wiLl now - select yOur [class]»

“...? I can select my [class]?”

«Yes - [Kingdom Royale] is designed so - that the player - has the advantage - over the NPCs - This applies - for the - psychologically-superior position - you have because you - know that the others are NPCs - and also for - the [vicarious experiences] – with which you were able - to learn about their behavior»

“And choosing one's [class] is another of those advantages...”

«EXactly»

Noitan's graphic disappears and the [classes] get displayed on the screen.

[King]

[Prince]

[The Double]

[Sorcerer]

[Knight]

[Revolutionary]

“...mh?”

I notice that [King], [Sorcerer] and [Revolutionary] are grayed out for some reason.

«The grayed out [classes] - are the ones - you can not select! - That is because - they were already - selected by - the other players»

Noitan explains, answering my question.

Already selected [classes], huh. [Revolutionary] was Daiya, [King] was Yuuri-san and [Sorcerer] was... I didn't have the chance to find out, but it must have been Iroha-san.

“But why was such a rule set up?”

«Because the players - who had their turn first - would be at - too great a disadvantage - without this rule! - They would gather - less information - from the [vicarious experiences] - after all - For that reason - we give them more freedom - in selecting their [classes] - to keep things fair.»

I see. ...well, I still think the first player is at a pretty big disadvantage, though...

Anyway, that means I can select [Prince], [The Double] and [Knight]. ...as one would expect, the remaining [classes] aren't exactly ideal for controlling the flow of the game.

“Ah...”

I notice a certain thing.

I can only select from those three [classes]. That also means that the dangerous [classes]: [King], [Sorcerer] and [Revolutionary] will definitely be assigned to others.

I recall the second game in which Yuuri-san was the player. That time, I had been the [Revolutionary]. A tragedy occurred nonetheless, but... what would have happened if Koudai Kamiuchi had been the [Revolutionary]?

I'm sure it would have ended up even worse. I probably wouldn't even have been able to save Maria.

If Daiya or Koudai Kamiuchi become the [Revolutionary] this time---

“---uh...”

I shudder. If that happened, it wouldn't be possible to solve the game peacefully without incident.

...no, I mustn't become timid. I must still lead them to the <E>-block of the eighth day without a single death.

«Choose - alrEady»

Urged by Noitan, I return my attention to the monitor.

[Prince], [The Double], [Knight] - which of them gives me the best chance to lead the group without anyone dying? Ultimately, I think the key has to be restraining the [Revolutionary]. Therefore---

I reach out my hand to press my chosen button.

«Are you - suRe?»

While urging me to choose already, Noitan still poses such a question!

“.....I am!”

The [class] that's suited to bring the [Revolutionary] onto his side because their victory conditions are similar. And the [class] that has powers of deterrence on top of that. It is---

I press the button for the [Knight].

The screen changes immediately and Noitan's graphic appears again.

«Alright - Kazuki-kun just beCame - the [Knight] - I hoPe - you will hide your desire - for revenge against the otHers - as it's written in the character setting - betrAy them - and slice them - with your swOrd»

“...revenge, huh. Don't make me laugh.”

When I murmur that, the mouth of the green bear splits open into a wide grin.

«No, you hold a grudge against those guys that deceived you and killed brutally, don't you? They tried to kill you for their own life's sake even! Hehehe»

He stops tottering and says those wicked words without any distortion. I remember. That ugly green bear can talk fluently when it chooses to.

“...You couldn't be any more wrong! I don't hold any grudges!”

«Stop playing the saint already, you piece of shit! Or would you readily forgive anyone while laughing like a dunce when you're about to get killed, you fucking masochist? You think that it's them who ought to die and not you anyway, don't you? Well, of course you do. After all, the others thought so, too, when they slaughtered you.»

“No way I’d think li---”

But there I stop.

Of course I don’t bear a grudge against them. I don’t want to take revenge either. I don’t feel like doing so at all.

However --- Yuuri-san and the others did indeed kill «me». Though that was just my copy, of course.

I can’t achieve my goal if I don’t put my life at stake. Therefore I’m prepared to risk my own life to protect the others. There might even be the need to become their shield and take everything upon me.

---for the sake of protecting the people that killed me several times.

Can I do that without wavering? Without doubt? Honestly speaking... I’m not really confident. So, will this slight doubt prevent me from achieving my goal?

I shake my head.

There’s no meaning in thinking like that.

I just need to do everything in my power to build a consensus where everyone can trust each other. If I manage to achieve that, no one will start killing.

“-----No.”

Maybe that’s not quite right. ...no, it’s not right.

That wouldn’t be enough.

Of course a relationship of mutual trust is necessary. But that alone is nowhere near enough. Koudai Kamiuchi would still move as he pleases, Yuuri-san

would still betray in order to survive, Iroha-san would only do what she believes is right and Daiya wouldn't cooperate anyway.

So, what am I supposed to do?

«Won't you listen to me! Just slaughter that bunch in a bloody frenzy and you're fine, you sneaking murderer!»

“Be quiet!”

«Do you even think you could hold hands with everyone while knowing there's a murderer among them? Give that thought up! You have to rule the others like your dirty slaves!»

“...shut up. Slaves, my ass! I could never---”

...No, is he right? Do I really have no other choice?

I'm not saying that the game can only be solved by killing each other. What I'm thinking is that it can't be solved by merely trusting each other.

Right, in other words, in order to win---

---I have to rule over them.

“.....Haha...”

What's that? In order to break out of this game, someone has to reign over the others like a «King», just as the title of the game implies: [Kingdom Royale]?

So I can win if I become the «King»?

Am I suited for that? It isn't realistic; there's no way I could manage to pull this off.

But at the same time, I realize:

That's the only way to make sure no one kills.

If that's the way things are---

«I'm just a powerless girl in this [Kingdom Royale].»

«---but still, I want to protect you even if I have to pay with my own life.»

---I'll do it. In order to protect Maria, who is just a powerless princess in this 'box', I'll do it.

«Come on - it is time - to greet the folks - that killed you»

Noitan disappears after this and the door opens.

Ugly desire dwells in that darkness. The malice that I'm supposed to fight against is out there.

I clench my fist.

Yeah... I got it!

"I'll---"

Become the «King».

### ►First Day <B> Big room

The six of us are already gathered in that hospital-like room.

Similarly to the second round, Iroha-san's knife threat was prevented by Daiya, so no knife has been pressed against my neck.

Thanks to that, the tension in the air wasn't too high and the events were progressing similarly to the second time. And like that time, we decided to do a self-introduction at the suggestion of Koudai Kamiuchi.

While listening to their self-introductions, I think about how I can bring the respective person under my rule.

“I am Iroha Shindou. My hobbies are---”

The student council president Iroha-san. Her watch is orange. She’s extremely talented. According to her, her extraordinarily high concentration is what makes her similar to a superhuman. She has a very frank character and almost never lies. She seems to be rather insensitive towards the subtleties of her own and others’ emotions, which may be because she usually stands above others. If she strengthens her resolve, she can even suppress her own emotions completely and become a murderer.

She likes Yuuri-san, but to me it looks a bit like that is just how she rationalized her own emotions in order to deal with the negative feelings she got from that love issue.

In other words, a bomb is hidden in her relationship with Yuuri-san.

I think she will not betray me if I manage to win her trust. She also has the power to control the atmosphere, so she would be a most reliable ally.

“I-I am Yuuri Yanagi.”

The top student of class 3-1, Yuuri-san. Her watch is beige. Contrary to Iroha-san, she’s very sensitive towards the emotions of others and is able to control their impressions of her. Furthermore, her character is

so determined she even takes advantage of others' favor towards her. Since the emotions she openly shows are mostly fake, it's very hard to notice this.

But essentially she's just a scaredy cat and actually good-willed. So she will absolutely not commit a sin if there's no need to do so.

It seems she doesn't simply think of Iroha-san as a good friend.

In other words, her relationship with Iroha-san is unstable from her side as well.

Rather than trust, it's important to calm her down by showing her the benefits she gets from cooperating with us.

"I'm Koudai Kamiuchi, nice to meet you."

The first year, Koudai Kamiuchi. His watch is green. He is an individual who doesn't hesitate to kill, going so far as to even enjoy the situation we are in. Because his actions are determined by what he finds «interesting» and he's indifferent about his own life, it's hard to read his actions. He's used to violence for some reason. Even Maria or Daiya will stand no chance against him if it comes to a one-on-one fight.

He's attracted to Yuuri-san, but that doesn't mean that he's considerate towards her.

There's no use trusting him, so I will certainly not be misled by him. He's the only clear enemy. To overcome him, I will probably have to build an environment in which he's unable to commit murder.

"I'm Daiya Oomine."

His watch is black.

He's the 'owner' of the 'Game of Idleness', but his stance in [Kingdom Royale] is still unclear.

Of course I have no idea how to cope with him.

"I'm the first year Maria Otonashi."

Her watch is red. The princess.

"---eh, ah!"

I stumbled. It seems I was so concentrated that I relaxed unconsciously when Maria's introduction ended.

"What are you doing there, Kazuki? Are you trying to act like an airhead character?"

Maria looks at me with half-opened eyes and Yuuri-san starts to giggle.

However --- it can't be helped, sure, but I don't feel too good about analyzing others as if I was trying to clear some game... well, they are NPCs as a matter of fact, though...

But I still don't think that matters. Even when they don't remember the past three rounds, even when their life and death in here doesn't affect them in reality - the NPCs are still exactly the same as the real people.

"It's your turn."

Maria suddenly urges me.

"Eh? What turn?"

"It's not 'what.' It's your turn to introduce yourself."

"Aa, I see."

The others' gazes naturally focus on me.

I'm about to open my mouth---but falter.

...right. I mustn't readily introduce myself. If I follow them and act as if I don't know anything now, that would bring up the question why I kept secrets from them and cause distrust later.

On the other hand, it's also dangerous to just tell them everything I know right now. If I say something I shouldn't, they will consider me suspicious.

“...Kazuki, why don't you say anything?”

“Ah, no---”

But now is the best chance to tell them about the ‘Game of Idleness’ without being doubted since Noitan hasn't explained the rules yet. I must reveal something.

The problem is how to select the information I'm supposed to unveil to them.

I resolve myself and open my mouth.

“I'm the second year Kazuki Hoshino. I'm Daiya's classmate and I have become acquainted with Maria already before her school entrance. Furthermore---”

I gulp down my saliva once and continue,

“---I'm the [Knight].”

Question marks appear on their faces.

“...Kazuki-kun. With «Knight» you're referring to some kind of medieval «Knight»?”

Iroha-san asks.

“I guess so.”

“Aah, you just startled me. I almost thought you were conferred knighthood by some queen or something. So, is «Knight» a metaphor for something, or---”

She gets interrupted.

«Yaa yaa yaa, as someone seems to be arbitrarily disclosing things, I will instantly tell you about this [Kingdom Royale]!»

«Okay thEn - I wiSh all oF you a - good fight! - Just dOn't end - the gAmE by - doing somETHing - as bOring-as tuRning - into muMmies everyone - okAy?»

Having finished explaining [Kingdom Royale] to us, Noitan disappears.

“Could we get an explanation now, Hoshino-kun?”

Iroha-san asked. She had glanced at me suspiciously several times during Noitan's speech.

“Why did only you know about [Kingdom Royale] at that point in time? And why do you know your [class], although no one should know this yet?”

Right, this is what it meant to reveal my [class]. I'm the most suspicious character for knowing this information no one should have right now.

I am the suspicious character Iroha-san has been searching for in each round by threatening us with her knife.

“.....But...”

It wasn't me who reacted to her question, but Yuuri-san.

“It's not advantageous at all for him to reveal his [class] like he did, right? It would have been much better for him to keep silent and to deceive us if he wanted to win the game...”

“Sure enough.”

“So I think that Hoshino-san purposely did something disadvantageous to discomfit the wire-puller of this game.”

I’m relieved. Someone actually understands why I’ve revealed that I’m the [Knight].

“...he purposely did something disadvantageous, huh. ...Yeah, maybe.”

Iroha-san relaxes her quite stern expression.

“But the question is, why did you do that?”

Iroha-san says and turns her sharp gaze to me.

I nod quietly at this gaze and start to speak,

“There’s something I want you to believe.”

What I mean is the other victory condition.

«You can survive if nobody kills anyone during those eight days.»

Those are Daiya’s words.

“There is a way to slip out of [Kingdom Royale] without meeting the victory conditions.”

I noticed that they all held their breath.

“An end where everyone turns into a mummy isn’t provided. In other words, if we all manage to survive until the <E>-block of the eighth day, the game will be aborted.”

This is my goal and at the same time it’s the solution everyone should be wishing for.

It’s not like any one of them wishes to kill in [Kingdom Royale]. They just can’t avoid murdering in order to survive or to protect the remaining others.

Yuuri-san and Iroha-san just committed murder when they were the players because they concluded that there was no other solution.

Showing them that there's another solution besides killing each other is the best way to prevent murder. Thus, I absolutely had to tell them.

“Now that you mention it... didn't Noitan-san also say something along these lines? That we shouldn't do something as boring as turning into mummies. Turning this sentence around... it might... back up what Hoshino-san just said.”

Yuuri-san murmured. She's searching for a basis to believe my words because she took this information favorably.

It's only natural to easily approve of convenient information. Therefore I just need to tell them the truth bit by bit until I can ultimately tell them the details about the 'boxes' and that Daiya's its 'owner'.

Yeah, I'm headed in the right direction.

If we all aim for the same goal, murder can't possibly occur.

That is---

“I'm afraid I can't consent yet.”

---if there wasn't this bothersome person.

Koudai Kamiuchi is here. And he gets bothered when there's no killing as he wants to enjoy [Kingdom Royale].

“Do you have an objection or what?”

When Iroha-san asks him like this, he flashes a frivolous expression and answers while scratching his head.

“Well, sure enough, I agree that Hoshino-senpai <sup>1</sup> is related to [Kingdom Royale]! But does that automatically mean that we can believe in his proposed solution?”

I could clearly see the uneasiness becoming thicker in Yuuri-san’s face.

“This solution could just as well be a lie, couldn’t it? Maybe Hoshino-senpai benefits in some way when we believe it, right?”

“That’s... not true!”

“Then tell us your foundation that proves that it’s not just idle talk.”

I falter. How should I explain it? How much do I need to explain such that he understands me when I don’t even know if they’d believe me when I told them the truth?

“Why can’t you explain yourself? Shouldn’t you be able to tell us everything without hiding anything if you really wanted to lead us out of good will?”

As I fail to object, he attacks me even more.

“You can’t explain it, huh. ...I see, I just found a plausible explanation!”

“...eh?”

“You’re a spy. If Hoshino-senpai is a spy who tries to confuse us, everything makes sense.”

---

1. Senpai: Upperclassman or senior

That one word was powerful.

That one word turned my words upside down and made them suspect me.

Wariness dwells in Yuuri-san's eyes.

Iroha-san furrows her eyebrows.

There's no way those two could determine whether to believe me or Koudai Kamiuchi as they don't remember the past rounds.

“.....uh...”

This is bad. If it goes on like this, I have no chance of becoming the «King» since they won't even trust me to begin with. Even worse, they might think of me as an enemy.

I reflexively turn my gaze downwards upon being the focus of cold gazes.

I can't think of any words to resolve this situation.

Is it already too late?

Have I already lost?

Can I really not win in the 'Game of Idleness'?

Koudai Kamiuchi flashes a grin and seems already sure to have won, but---

“Cut it out already, Kamiuchi.”

His menacing grin gets erased by her voice.

Maria.

I calm down just by the fact that she raised her voice.  
I start smiling.

Right, she always helps me out. I don't have to worry anymore. I'm safe n---

“-----ah”

.....That's not good at all. Why am I calming down?

It was this kind of dependence that lead to the bad ends. Didn't I learn this firsthand during the previous rounds?

But... although I'm aware of this--although I'm supposed to save Maria, not the other way around--I accepted her help again.

“Stop trying to trick Kazuki into looking like the bad guy.”

Koudai Kamiuchi widens his eyes and spreads his arms exaggeratedly.

“Whoa, please don't say strange things. Isn't it obviously Hoshino-senpai who's trying to trick us all?”

“Then tell me why you're trying to create confusion.”

“...what do you mean?”

“You don't get it? Then that's proof that you have no proper personality.”

“Wait, wait... why?”

“I'll tell you: if you thought like an ordinary person, you would want to follow Kazuki's proposal, leaving aside whether you believed it or not. Also, for pointing out that his proposal is suspicious. One would normally do it differently.”

“Really? Isn't it normal to press a question upon Hoshino-senpai when he's suspicious?”

“You wouldn’t do it like that. That is because Kazuki tries to prevent a slaughter with his proposal. Even without knowing Kazuki’s intention, you should want this proposal to prove itself true. Despite this, you’re distinctly denying Kazuki. You’re distinctly denying a person that made a proposal to prevent a slaughter.”

Koudai Kamiuchi closes his mouth.

“Are you aware that it’s dangerous what you’re doing here? In a sense, this could become the spark that leads to killing. If you just wanted to make the others pay more attention, you would still need to do it more carefully. ...well, of course it’s different if you want to encourage us to take part in the game.”

After getting silenced, he starts to object again smiling wryly.

“...sure, I may have gone too far. But then why is Hoshino-senpai unable to explain anything?”

“Even you gather that this place is abnormal, right?”

Koudai Kamiuchi purses his lips at Maria’s sudden words.

“Well, yeah...? So?”

“This is a space that was created by aliens from Sirius for the purpose of observing the mode of life of us earthlings.”

“.....Hah?”

I’m sure that’s what she’s been aiming for. Maria raises the corner of her mouth.

“Do you believe me?”

“...no way I would!”

“So what kind of reason for this incident would you believe then?”

Koudai Kamiuchi frowns upon hearing her question.

“I don’t mind whether it’s a lie or fiction - just explain the reason for this space to us so that we can understand and agree to it.”

He thinks for a short while before he answers “...no, I can’t.”

“So let’s assume Kazuki knows the truth, but this truth is something as absurd as my story about the Sirius aliens - do you seriously think he could tell us that, right now, right here? Could he really say it while knowing he would become disadvantaged without doubt?”

“.....”

Having been silenced like that, Koudai Kamiuchi stole a glance at me.

He was smiling as always, but in his eyes was---

“.....uh...”

---a light that bore unconcealable madness.

Even I only saw it for a split second, so I’m probably the only one who noticed this madness. In the next moment, he flashed a carefree smile and spread his arms affectedly.

“Okay, okay, I lost. I was too absorbed in trying to bring my doubts to light, so I didn’t think about the others enough. I’m really so sorry!”

I saw that Yuuri-san and Iroha-san relaxed just a little at seeing his smile.

But I know the danger behind that smile. It's a smile to skillfully conceal his madness. I know, because I was tricked by it once before and lost.

But for the time being we could avoid the worst situation of us rivaling each other.

However---

«Don't worry, Kazuki. I will protect you.»

I clench my fist.

---it's no good like that. Not at all!

If I stay so weak that I get overwhelmed this easily by Koudai Kamiuchi, I will definitely give in to this 'box'.

And Maria will be killed by the 'Game of Idleness'.

### ►First Day <C> [Kazuki Hoshino]'s room

«Your [class] is [Knight]»

This obvious message is written on the monitor.

The others should have seen this screen by now as well. I can only pray that the [classes] were distributed in my favor.

«Hey you bastard, what's wrong with you that you expose facts of your own accord?! How will you make up for this if it gets boring because of you damn hypocrite! If that happens give me back my money!»

Noitan started to curse right after appearing, but as usual I can't counter with anything.

«Choose your partner for the [Secret Meeting], you scum.»

The blood-shot-eyed Noitan vanishes and the photographs of six people appear.

[Secret Meeting], huh. I know exactly who I'll choose. I reach out almost reflexively for Maria's picture---but stop my hand halfway.

Is it really alright to pick her?

It's no mistake to choose Maria. In order to save Maria, I will certainly need her cooperation.

But... I reached out my hand reflexively. Almost without thinking.

Is that because I instantly concluded that it is the right choice?

...as if. Even after what just happened out there, I'm unconsciously trying to rely on Maria again.

Therefore, I should not choose her, no matter if it's right or wrong to select her.

I will cut off my dependence on her.

"I will fight, alone."

Therefore, I'll choose the person I'm going to beat first.

I stretch out my stopped hand. I choose---

«Hoho - this iS - an uneXpected - tuRn»

---«Iroha Shindou».

I will become the «King».

For that sake, I will first put Iroha-san under my rule.

[Iroha Shindou]	->	[Yuuri Yanagi]	15:00~16:00
[Yuuri Yanagi]	->	[Iroha Shindou]	15:00~16:00
[Daiya Oomine]	->	[Kazuki Hoshino]	15:00~15:30
[Kazuki Hoshino]	->	[Iroha Shindou]	16:20~16:50
[Koudai Kamiuchi]	->	[Daiya Oomine]	16:20~16:50
[Maria Otonashi]	->	[Daiya Oomine]	15:40~16:10

►**First Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Daiya Oomine], [Kazuki Hoshino]'s room**

I've already prepared myself for the [Secret Meeting] with Iroha-san, but the one with Daiya is first. Which means that he selected me quicker than I chose Iroha-san.

Since I was all ready to speak with Iroha-san, this is kind of a let-down, but I get a grip of myself right away.

I must be careful.

Daiya arrived immediately at my room when it was time. Before even sitting down on the table, he scowls at me.

“...hey, are you really Kazuki Hoshino?”

“Eh?”

An unexpected question.

It's more like the others can't be called real since they are copies, but he doesn't know that.

No, but that he poses such a question means that he's not aware of being the 'owner' of the 'Game of Idleness'. Daiya's NPC fights under the same conditions as the other NPCs.

...Wait. Does that mean that----

“.....Daiya. How do you think about this ‘box’?”

“You have some nerves ignoring my question and asking one yourself. ...Anyway, let me tell you.”

He continues, frankly showing me his discomfort.

“This ‘box’ is trash.”

As I thought.

“There’s no meaning in the existence of a nonsensical ‘box’ that just exists for making people play a game about killing each other.”

This Daiya thinks exactly like the Daiya of the second round.

In fact, his words are almost the same as in the second round. It’s obvious now that I think about it. Daiya’s NPC hasn’t taken over his memory. It’s only natural that he would take the same actions since their amount of information is the same.

And if memory serves me right, in the second round he---

“Who’s so stupid to play such a pathetic game like [Kingdom Royale]?”

---tried to stop [Kingdom Royale].

In other words, my goal of stopping [Kingdom Royale] matches the goal of Daiya’s NPC. So you could call him an «Ally».

No, Daiya isn't my only «Ally». Except for Koudai Kamiuchi, all the other NPCs don't want to kill actively either. As a matter of fact, only the players did so in order to survive, because they knew that the others were NPCs and thought there was no other way out.

...a chance of winning may just have come in sight a little.

“Daiya, there's something I want to tell you. Okay?”

“What?”

“Your stance is the most dangerous one.”

Daiya frowns.

“...what the...? Sure enough, I may look like a dangerous individual seen from the others' point of view. After all, I might be able to kill someone if it's necessary. ...but so what? Why do you say that now? Do you want to persuade me because I'm dangerous?”

“...No. I didn't mean to say that you're dangerous, but that you're in danger the most. In other words, you're at risk of being killed.”

“Don't talk bullsh---”

But he stops instantly.

“No, it's not all that wrong, huh. Leaving aside whether it's really 'the most,' I agree that I could easily become a target because of this personality of mine. Because I look dangerous to them!”

“That's not the only reason.”

When I say this, Daiya stares at me wordlessly.

“It's also because you're the 'owner'.”

“Hah? Don’t mess with me! Sure, I’m an ‘owner’, but I’m most definitely not the ‘owner’ of such a ‘box’.”

Come to think of it, he also defamed this ‘box’ as nonsensical or something in the second round. I’m amazed he can say that, in spite of using it as a way to stave off his boredom...

Or is it also a lie that he’s using it to stave off boredom? Does he really have a hidden goal which I shouldn’t know? And not even his NPC is able to see through the real Daiya’s intention?

...I don’t know, but I’d better hide the information that would make this confusing.

“...no matter what the truth is, Maria thinks of you as the creator of [Kingdom Royale]. Therefore, I think there’s a high possibility that the others would falsely assume that crushing the ‘box’ - or killing you - solves this case when they get to know that.”

In fact, in the second round he was killed first because of that.

“...Well, possible. But still, it’s funny that I’m not being told «don’t kill anyone» but «don’t get killed by anyone».”

Saying so, he scowls at me.

“As I thought, you’re strange somehow. Our good-natured Kazuki Hoshino normally wouldn’t be capable of such a thought. Even if you really hit upon this, you would never tell me with so much confidence. What’s with that attitude? Almost, as if you’ve already---”

He stops there.

“...I see... it finally makes sense to me. That’s also why your attitude towards Shindou and the others seemed strange to me, huh. Hey, --- it’s not the first time you’re playing [Kingdom Royale], right?”

That’s Daiya as we know him.

He was able to arrive at the truth with only this little information, although there would be many other possibilities. His capability really is amazing.

“...judging from your expression, looks like I’m right. Well, the truth doesn’t matter to me. I only need to know what you’re trying to make me do after making me answer your question. So, try telling me your plans.”

Daiya speaks arrogantly.

“But be prepared to be used by me.”

I unconsciously close my mouth.

In this [Secret Meeting] I originally wanted to find out how he’s going to move. Put another way, I didn’t have concrete plans of what to do with him.

However, I came to know that we share our goals.

Couldn’t this be the greatest chance I have? I’d be able to work together with Daiya.

I mean, there can’t possibly be a situation where he listens to me more unaffectedly than now. If he believes me, we can do something about his situation of being an easy target. And most of all, I’d have access to his outstanding wit. That would be a huge leap towards the achievement of my goal.

Of course it's still risky. If he wants, he can easily make use of me as he said. I don't say so because I've become faint-hearted, but because it's a fact I experienced in the first round.

But---

"I know the system of the 'Game of Idleness' well."

I can't stay silent anymore. I guess it was already decided that this would happen since the time I revealed being the [Knight].

"There's a lot I want to tell you, but first I'll teach you how the previous three rounds of [Kingdom Royale] progressed! In the first round---

Like this, I started explaining to him.

Daiya silently listened to me, almost without interrupting me.

Unable to tell him everything in the remaining time, the [Secret Meeting] ended with the appointment continuing in the next [Secret Meeting].

**►First Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Iroha Shindou], [Iroha Shindou]'s room**

I don't know whether the cooperation with Daiya will go well. But for now I'll switch and concentrate on the next matter.

The partner of the next [Secret Meeting] is the person I ought to clear first---I ought to control first---Iroha Shindou. I've already decided what I'm going to tell her to achieve that.

The reason why I want to bring her under my rule right off. It's because she has the power to change the mood more than anyone else.

Therefore, I have to move before she can do something that's disadvantageous for me.

At least she shouldn't completely reject what I have to say, judging from her attitude earlier.

It's alright.

Reassuring myself, I enter Iroha-san's room.

“.....”

And yet, I wonder why? Iroha-san was standing there, expressionlessly, with crossed arms, almost as if she was awaiting an enemy.

“May I ask? Why did you choose me as your partner for the [Secret Meeting]?”

A wariness she hasn't shown in the big room.

I answer her while feeling a little anxious.

“Because I wanted to make you my comrade first, Iroha-san!”

That's no lie.

“...«Iroha-san»?”

Iroha-san narrows her eyes suspiciously.

“Umm, what do you mean?”

“...most people call me «Kaichou» when they first meet me, you know. Thus it feels awkward being called by the real name right away. It seems like I'm hard to approach familiarly.”

Now that she mentions it, I was calling her «Kaichou» as well until she told me to stop...

“Anyway... why would you want to make me your comrade first? ...wait, better not say it. You noticed that I’m trying to control the mood anyway, right?”

“.....eh?”

I’m perplexed at her stunningly quick understanding.

“You’re troubled when I arbitrarily do something that ends up worsening your position. Hence, you want to quickly make me your comrade, right?”

“Well, yeah...”

What the hell? It’s almost like she predicted what I was going to say.

“Let’s assume that one obediently follows someone like a little child and it ultimately leads to a good outcome, okay? Even if things went well by luck, I can’t appreciate such people. Because it means stopping one’s own thinking and leaving one’s life to someone else, you see. Say, don’t you agree?”

“.....err---”

“It just doesn’t suit me. Obeying someone’s instructions, dancing to someone’s pipe - that’s no fun. ...Um, where were we? You said you want to put me under your control on the pretext of making me a comrade?”

As I thought.

As I thought, she has already seen through my intention.

“But as I said, I choose to not move by your leadership. We choose to move by thinking «ourselves».”

“...we?”

Iroha-san doesn't answer the obvious question of whom she refers to that way.

There's only one person that would join forces with Iroha-san at this point in time.

Yuuri Yanagi.

There's only Yuuri, who once tried to kill Iroha-san through [Sorcery].

...there's no way this could be a good course of events.

"Honestly speaking, I basically wanted to believe what you told us in the big room!"

"...Eh?"

"But you know, in our [Secret Meeting] Yuuri pointed out that you seem to one-sidedly know us well. Well... of course people hear about us to a certain extent through rumors, but she said that you're not on that level; that you seem to know about us more in detail."

"That's because---"

But Iroha-san doesn't let me interrupt her.

"I don't care what you know about us. That is because I know that you're in a special position. But you know, the problem is that you hid that fact. You didn't reveal to us right away that you have information that gives you an advantage to fight in this game."

"I-I didn't mean to...! No. I just didn't say it because that's not something you can say right away!"

“Yeah. May be. But there’s no guarantee. I don’t know whether you’re the instigator or an endorser or an opponent of this game. I want to believe the latter, but if I’m wrong, our lives are at stake. Don’t you think it’s too risky for us to just obey your words?”

Therefore, she doesn’t follow me.

Aah, shit... it’s an obvious consequence.

“Don’t worry. I won’t ignore your opinion, Hoshino-kun. I will properly hear you out! But «we» decide whether we believe it. Our life depends on it, so we can’t just blindly follow someone. Therefore, I won’t become your «comrade». Sorry.”

I do think her judgment is appropriate and I also think it seems like the best decision to make for them.

It’s also a situation where it seems like I can still achieve anything.

But it only seems like that---I can’t anymore-

This is already a dead-end.

“.....Iroha-san.”

“What? Do you still want to try persuading me? No problem. I’ll listen!”

“.....”

To tell the truth, I thought I could expose almost everything to her like I did with Daiya. Because I expected that she would comparatively accept my story favorably as she’s capable of calm decisions. At least I think she would have supported me more or less in my goal to «end the game without anyone dying».

“...I changed my mind.”

---it won't go that way anymore.

"I see."

After all, Iroha-san would tell everything to Yuuri-san. And as soon Yuuri-san's opinion mixed in, a change would definitely occur.

That is because unlike Iroha-san, who can view things objectively, Yuuri-san doesn't believe things that aren't in her favor. For example, I don't think she would believe that she's only a NPC at the moment or that she bears the sin of murder on her shoulders.

What would Yuuri-san do after hearing my words, that are unfavorable to her?

I can see it clearly.

She would deny it.

She would consider me her enemy.

And then she would aim to win [Kingdom Royale], making use of Iroha-san.

In other words---she would commit murder.

Therefore, this is already a dead-end.

"-----"

There was still spare time.

But I didn't find anything to talk about anymore.

### ►First Day <D> Big room

And I had to see the consequence of my failure right away, in its worst shape.

"I think we need groups."

Iroha-san waited for the moment everyone was sitting to say that.

I failed to immediately grasp her intention. Iroha-san and Yuuri-san are cooperating, after all. Why does she need to announce this to everyone?

But seeing her smiling at me, I understand.

This is some kind of constraint.

A constraint against me and the «person who knows the reasons for [Kingdom Royale]» in whose existence she believes.

Iroha-san has put me on the enemy side because I failed to achieve anything in our [Secret Meeting].

“It seems there is the need for an explanation. First, let me confirm our goal. Naturally that is to get out of here without any killing incident. Am I right?”

No one objects.

“Okay, Hoshino-kun proposed one method to achieve this. According to him we automatically get out of here if all of us survive. That sure sounds like an attractive proposition, really! But don’t you agree that it’s too dangerous to believe him blindly and move as he wants us to, without knowing his true motivations?”

After checking that everyone’s listening seriously, she continues.

“But well, there’s no real other good plan that comes to mind, is there? We can’t even tell for sure whether he’s telling the truth or not. But that also means that no murder will occur. Why? Because no one would commit murder for winning the game when there’s this attractive proposal that *might* be true.”

“Well, I guess so.”

Hearing Koudai Kamiuchi's agreement, I can barely manage to not scream out «You're the only one that's not like that!».

“In other words, we would ultimately follow Hoshino-kun's goal. Without fully believing him, we would spend eight days without doing anything.”

“Maybe. But in the end we may get saved as he said, and in any case, it's much better than to kill each other in the game, isn't it?”

Iroha-san answers her as Maria nods.

“Yes, sure, but there's also someone who's not like that, isn't there?”

“Who?”

Then, Iroha-san says without changing her expression,

“The instigator of the game.”

The person she perceives as her enemy.

She didn't mistake whom to consider as her enemy. But it's not possible to defeat him - because his non-NPC version isn't here.

Thus, Iroha-san drifts off the correct path to take.

“I don't know what his intention is, but the instigator of this game definitely wishes to see the repugnant scene of us fighting each other. Or can you find any other aim in such a meaningless game?”

No one objects. Because everyone can agree to what she's saying, even without definite proof.

And I know that she's actually right. This 'box', that was created by Daiya as a way to stave off boredom, does indeed not wish that things proceed without anything happening.

But let me repeat this: he isn't here.

"Therefore, someone --- someone who supports the instigator --- will certainly change the flow so that people will die in this game."

Iroha-san speaks while clearly looking at me.

She has mistaken her enemy.

"...do you want to say that Kazuki's going to do that?"

"No, I didn't say so. I only want to say that there might still be someone among us who wants to change the flow. And that it's dangerous if he manages to do that. Therefore, we will divide into «groups»."

"Into «us» and «the instigators»."

I see. Thinking that there are «instigators» isn't Iroha-san's only mistake.

"Yeah. Why not?"

"I think... we need to do so, too."

Her gravest mistake is to think that no one would spur on the game apart from the «instigators».

Fair enough. When I was an NPC, I also didn't want to believe there were people like Koudai Kamiuchi who actually want to play a killer-game. I also didn't notice

that Yuuri-san would go as far as committing murder. Both are things I wouldn't have come to know without experiencing the second round.

It's not something she could possibly notice without remembering the previous rounds.

But Iroha-san continues her explanation, having no idea of all that.

"Our greatest concern right now is the trap of the instigator. But we can ward this off as long we don't act as he wants us to. No, rather we should comprehend his intention and use it against him to grasp an outcome where no one kills anyone."

Maria asks with a frown,

"That's why you want to divide us in «groups»?"

"Exactly. I think that, if we all act separately, someone will fall for his intention. On top of that, we all have our own interests. The worst case scenario I can think of is that one of the psychically weaker people will start to suspect the rest and make the grave mistake of committing murder.

But what if our wills are united? What if we all have a will that can't be shaken, whatever happens? The trap of «the instigators» would degrade to being a joke! Therefore, I'm saying we should build «groups» with a united will. Of course the «the instigators» who want to trick us won't be able to enter there."

“Hmpf,” Daiya snorts at her explanation, “I got your reasoning, but how do you plan to build those «groups»? To begin with, how can you distinguish the instigators from the others?”

“There’s no way I could distinguish them, is there?”

Iroha-san says as if it was a matter of course.

“What? But then---”

“Therefore---I’ll just take their freedom away.”

Iroha-san says without letting Daiya speak out.

“...I can’t seem to understand you. Will you threaten everyone who doesn’t agree with you or what?”

“The opposite!”

Daiya raises an eyebrow.

“The opposite?”

“Yeah, the opposite. I won’t take away the freedom of the people that don’t follow my plan, but of those who agree with me.”

Not only Daiya, but everyone here widened their eyes.

“I won’t allow any objection against me from anyone who belongs to my «group». I’ll have them swear absolute obedience to me. And I will kill anyone who betrays me.”

“K-Kill...hey...”

Looking straight at me, when I said that, she explains,

“Let me tell you how I’ll do it. First, I’ll make the ones who approve of me hand me over their food supply. If we can believe that Uglypoo, we will die by turning into mummies if we don’t eat anything in the <E>-block, right? Therefore, I will flush away everyone’s food in the

toilet as soon someone even shows a sign of betraying me. If they properly obey me, I'll give them one portion at each <D>-block. Well, by food management, you can achieve the same effect as the [Revolutionary] does with [Assassination], you see."

"Wait, wait, wait."

Daiya stops her explanation.

"Why should anyone want to enter your «group» while knowing what awaits him there?"

Iroha-san flashes a cold smile to his question.

"Everyone who belongs to my «group» vows me absolute obedience. Of course, they cannot do anything. They also can't try to stir up a killer-game. Therefore, I will judge everyone who belongs to my «group» as a victim that was involved in this game or as a loser who gave up fighting against me. On the other hand, I judge everyone who doesn't belong to my «group» as an enemy that has the intent to fight."

Iroha-san stops once and takes a breath.

Then, she raises the corner of her mouth slightly and declares,

"If you want to prove that you're no enemy, then at least toady to me!"

Everyone loses their tongue to her rude words - even Daiya.

In short, Iroha-san's saying that it's not optional to enter her «group», but forced, and that everyone who does not obey her will get erased by her.

Taking a glance at our silenced faces, she continues without changing her expression,

“I hit upon the method to clear this game. Someone with the right will has to rule over the others. Mh, well, you could say it's becoming a temporary «King».”

Becoming a «King».

It's the same conclusion that I've come to.

“I know that I just said something extremely selfish. Of course it's possible that I make a wrong decision. It's also possible that someone will die due to my mistakes. I admit this possibility! But I'm sure you agree that it's much better than acting separately, getting into chaos and starting to distrust everyone, right?”

“Where's the necessity for you to do that?”

“There's none.”

She answers frankly to Daiya's remark.

“But I don't think there's anyone who's more suited for it than me.”

She says confidently. Daiya scratches his head after hearing that and continues,

“That's not the only problem. From our point of view, we can't deny the possibility that you are the instigator yourself. Before we can follow you, you need to prove to us that you're trustworthy.”

“I see. I forgot because I’m not one of «the instigators». ...you obviously won’t believe it when I just say it like this, huh. Well, can’t be helped, I’ll just show you.”

Saying this, she pulls up her shirt.

“My resolve of becoming the «king»!”

A knife is there.

“W-What are you---”

Ignoring me, she thrusts the knife into the table. Yuuri-san stiffens because of the loud, dull sound.

“Take a good look, guys! This is what you call resolve!”

She tears off her uniform’s scarf and wraps it strongly around her left little finger so that her blood almost stops.

What on earth is she---

My comprehension can’t follow her actions. But completely ignoring this fact, she grasps the knife before her eyes with her right hand.

Unbelievably sharp, determined eyes. She raises the corners of her mouth and breathes wildly. Cold sweat appears on her forehead.

“I-Iroha?”

She makes Yuuri-san retreat with the sole force of her glance. And then---

“Uh, UAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!”

She roared and---

“Ha! Ahaha, ahahahahahahaha!!”

---cut off her own little finger.

“Ah, aah-----”

Neglecting Yuuri-san who has turned pale and lost her tongue, Iroha-san continues to laugh.

“W-What are you doing---?!”

Maria, who was unable to react to the sudden turn of things as well, rushes to Iroha-san, tears off her white shirt and starts to stop the bleeding. Iroha-san didn't stop this, but breaths wildly while contorting her mouth.

Then, she turns her awe-inspiringly determined glance to me.

Of course I'm overcome with fear by such a thing!

“How is it? Do you think someone who just wants to enjoy such a pathetic game would be capable of this kind of resolve? Do I, who can cut off her own finger with mere determination, really look like such a rookie?”

“Uh, uuh.....”

“No way, ha! Haha! I! Do! Certainly NOT enjoy this game! I'm strong and won't give in...! I'm a born leader! Got it, guys?!!”

We got overwhelmed.

We have no other choice but to obey, seeing her like this.

Right.

This is---Iroha Shindou.

This is---Iroha Shindou's resolve of becoming the «king».

“Entrust them to me! Your life, your soul - entrust them to me just for the while we’re in this game! I’ll bear everything for you! I’ll take all the responsibility and bear it until I break!”

She throws her little finger away.

To display us that she cut off any attachment to such things.

“Follow me, people! And be prepared, my enemies! As if I’d let it go your way, you fools! I’ll rule this place! That’s right, I---”

Then, she speaks sharply:

“I will become the «king»!”

This strength.

I can’t help but get timid. There can be only one «king». There can’t possibly be two at the same time. In other words, I will absolutely have to fight against her, who is a superhuman without any doubt.

That’s unreasonable! There’s no way I could win.

My immense fear suddenly lights up a new thought in me:

...couldn’t I just leave becoming the «king» to her?

It’s not important who the «king» is. As long there’s someone capable who rules the place and ultimately no one kills anyone, I can achieve my goal of protecting Maria. So isn’t it okay to entrust her with everything?

“-----”

I know. That’s not possible.

I mean, she can't fight against her enemy. She is just an NPC and her real version has already ended her fight.

I look around.

Yuuri-san is shivering and emptiness is starting to dwell in her eyes.

Koudai Kamiuchi seems calm, but he can't conceal the enjoyment in his eyes.

But Iroha Shindou hasn't noticed. Because of her outstanding nature, she can't take notice of the delicate signs of the human heart.

If she becomes the «king», she's only going to get betrayed and killed like the [King] in the scenario of [Kingdom Royale].

Right, therefore, I have to do it.

I can't rely on Iroha-san. I can't rely on Maria. I can't rely on anyone in this fourth round of [Kingdom Royale].

After all, I'm the only one here.

Right now I'm the only one who's really fighting against Daiya, who's in that dark room.

I look at the finger she has thrown away.

Iroha-san, I understand the extent of your resolve.

I also know that you're an amazing person.

But still --- you're not geared for it.

You can't become the «king». You're an embarrassing child who's trying to become the «king» while playing just a minor role here - get lost.

The only one that has the right to become the «king»--is me!

►First Day <F> [Kazuki Hoshino]'s room

After that, Yuuri-san and Koudai Kamiuchi joined her «group». Leaving aside Yuuri-san, I didn't expect Koudai Kamiuchi to approve that easily. Well, most likely he hasn't given it any deeper thought, though.

Maria and Daiya have put their decisions on hold for now. Since Iroha-san also seems to think that absolute obedience isn't that simple to decide, she will wait until the third day --- or to be more precisely, until its «D»-block when we all gather.

But even now, we're already suspected to be on the side of the «instigators».

Not only Iroha-san, but also Yuuri-san is surely on guard against us, even if you can't see it on her face. We are already opposing each other. And there's no way anyone would believe the word of someone in an opposing «group».

But, well, of course, I have to move. I have to break her delusion of being able to become the «king».

To begin with, there's no way this game could be stopped with a «group» system. Koudai Kamiuchi's hideousness can't be suppressed by such a thing and I also don't think that Iroha-san's able to control Yuuri-san's actions. Those two may have joined the «group»,

but they haven't submitted themselves. Iroha-san can't know about this without knowledge from the previous rounds.

Therefore, I have to destroy the «group»-system itself.

But I don't think this is manageable by attacking her now that she has strengthened her resolve. She has already made becoming the «king» her goal.

I know all too well that she won't be shaken anymore once she has set something as her goal. I've come to know that firsthand during the third round and with her cutting her finger just now.

So, I have no choice but to attack another person.

“.....which is...”

The person I should charge naturally flashes in my mind.

Yuuri Yanagi.

She won't be easy to persuade. But I can only destroy the «group» through Yuuri-san.

Yeah, right. Let's charge Yuuri-san tomorrow.

I close my thinking there and lie down on the bed.

I think the situation didn't turn out too well. I think I was totally too weak. I have to become more resolute and act better. But for now---

First day, no victims.

## ►Second Day <B> Big room

“Okay, hand them over.”

At Iroha-san's command, Yuuri-san and Koudai Kamiuchi lay their food portions, knives and, for some reason, their watches on the table.

Iroha-san takes them upon nodding and puts them on on her left arm that lacks a finger. Somehow I understood that this is supposed to be a sign that she's ruling the two of them.

...but it still seems strange to me that she can remain so straightfaced, as if she hadn't had that little finger to begin with. ...Doesn't it still hurt?

"Ah, don't even try to speak to them, okay? I restricted what they are allowed to say."

Now that she mentions it, those two haven't opened their mouth except for greeting us.

Judging from this state of affairs, I'm sure they also revealed their [classes] to her.

"Well, «we» won't have anything new to talk about with you, so if you've got anything, call on me."

Maria steals a glance at me but doesn't open her mouth after all. Maria knows that this is the deed of a 'box'. She knows that we can doubtlessly approach a solution if we convey this fact properly to the others.

But she can't say it.

Now that Iroha-san has built «groups», it doesn't matter anymore whether it's the truth or not. What matters is whether Iroha-san can believe it or not. And if she can't, then it'll be very hard to recover afterwards.

At least Maria won't be able to move until she knows why I already knew of the 'Game of Idleness'.

Therefore, it was inevitable that Iroha-san started talking to us one-sidedly, acting calm as if nothing had happened. She seemed interested in our everyday lives and happily addressed ordinary topics like our hobbies or what we're doing on our days off. But we know of the danger of our words being misunderstood. It was almost as if the prosecutor and the accused had a come-together party in the courtroom.

During all this time, I was looking at Yuuri-san while answering Iroha-san carefully.

She had her gaze turned downwards almost the whole time.

If she starts to move---

I recall the second round. Unlike Iroha-san who acts openly, Yuuri-san acts secretly. It's too late once her secret maneuvering gets revealed.

Will Yuuri-san really do anything? Being so calculating, I don't think she will take overly hasty actions if she has come to the conclusion that Iroha-san's plan will work the best to survive...

Yuuri-san suddenly notices my gaze and raises her head.

Even while being a bit nervous, she flashes a wry smile as if to sympathize with me. Her defenseless smile still carries the charm of a little animal, so I can't help but think she's cute.

Cute?

Is she trying to make me think she's cute?

She's not shunning me, but trying to make me her ally in this state of affairs?

“.....”

No, I'm thinking too much into it. Even she doesn't produce each and every expression purposely. I know that.

I know that... but I noticed something else.

Did I just wonder whether she will move or not?

Why am I still so carefree to ask myself such questions? Things aren't at that stage anymore.

In the second round, she started acting immediately after arriving here --- well, of course being the player may have sped that up. But her actions are always fast. Thus, she's already planning something in this round, too.

Yuuri Yanagi had started moving long ago.

**►Second Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Yuuri Yanagi], [Yuuri Yanagi]'s room**

[Iroha Shindou]	->	[Maria Otonashi]	15:00~15:30
[Yuuri Yanagi]	->	[Iroha Shindou]	15:40~16:10
[Daiya Oomine]	->	[Koudai Kamiuchi]	15:00~15:30
[Kazuki Hoshino]	->	[Yuuri Yanagi]	15:00~15:30
[Koudai Kamiuchi]	->	[Iroha Shindou]	16:20~16:50
[Maria Otonashi]	->	[Kazuki Hoshino]	15:40~16:10

The way things went forced me to immediately have a [Secret Meeting] with Yuuri-san.

Therefore I was unable to keep my appointment with Daiya. But that really couldn't be helped.

I enter Yuuri-san's room.

When she notices me, she promptly stands up from the bed and bows repeatedly.

"I'm sorry, Hoshino-san. I'm not allowed to speak with you in the [Secret Meeting] either. So I'm afraid I won't be able to speak even if you want to talk with me..."

This attitude.

Yuuri-san should definitely think that I'm one of «the instigators» and be on guard against me. That's for sure.

And yet she's trying to signify that she's just following Iroha-san without particularly disliking me.

So that she's still able to make me her ally if it's necessary.

.....but even if she's that crafty, I have to bring that to an end.

"...Iroha-san isn't here! Will you still follow her instruction, nevertheless?"

"Um... I also have to show Iroha my portable terminal."

Iroha-san truly doesn't overlook anything. But that was within my expectations.

Therefore, I have a counter plan.

"I'll be frank: are you really okay with this?"

"U-Umm... as I said... I can't answer you. Really."

“Do you think that Iroha-san’s plan will succeed?”

“U-Umm---”

When she looks around bothered, her look stops on the table.

Because she has noticed that something is written on the memo book I’ve put on the table.

«Our conversation won’t leak if we write»

Things written on a memo sheet won’t be recorded on the portable terminal. This is something I noticed in the second round when I received a memo sheet from Koudai Kamiuchi.

Yuuri-san widens her eyes and gazes at me. Looks like she’s figured out the meaning of this.

I hold the pen out to her. But it seems like she can’t decide on what to do right away. Apart from folding her hands in front of her chest, she doesn’t move.

“...I got it! You can’t say anything, right? I won’t say anything either, then. Aah-ah, what a bummer. So I just wasted a [Secret Meeting], huh...”

In order to trick Iroha-san, I fake my words and then move my hand.

«What do you really want to do? Will you follow Iroha-san just like this?»

When I’m done writing, I hold the pen again out to Yuuri-san.

But she just shakes her head to signalize me that she can’t.

«No matter what?»

I tried writing this, but she still gives me a negative answer.

...well, nothing to be surprised about. No one would readily listen to someone he's on guard against.

Thus, I'll tempt her.

I'll tempt her so that she won't be able to stay calm anymore.

I write the words that shall accomplish that.

«You didn't even love him.»

Surprised by that sudden, cryptic sentence, she looks at me with widened eyes. But, I won't stop now. I'll upset her even more by shocking her and make sure she will have to answer me.

I continue.

«You went out with the boy Iroha-san loved, right?»

“-----!!”

The effect was outstanding.

Yuuri-san's shoulders have started to tremble fiercely and her face has become horribly pale.

I make a composed face and hold the pen out once again. Yuuri-san looks back and forth between my face and the pen several times before she eventually comes to the conclusion that she can't reject it anymore and accepts it with teary eyes.

But as it seems she still wants to play dumb; she wrote 《What are you talking about?》 with a trembling hand. However, when I stay silent without any reaction, she immediately tears off the sheet and crumples it up.

Yuuri-san then starts to write with a single tear drop sliding down her cheek.

《why do you know?》

《it should be impossible to figure out》

《iroha herself shouldn't have noticed yet》

After finishing, she passes the memo book back to me, along with the pen. She wipes her tears away and turns eyes up to me.

.....Ha, I won't be rattled by such an expression!

《You told me yourself.》

To be exact, I heard it from Iroha-san but it'd be a pain to explain that now.

Yuuri-san shakes her hand almost fearfully.

《i don't get you! i've never told you anything like that. what on earth are you referring to?》

As expected so far. It was my aim to get her to ask that 《why?》 .

Thanks to that, I can finally write what I wanted.

《It's not my first time playing [Kingdom Royale]》

Yuuri-san gazes at me anxiously; looks like she doesn't understand just by that.

But if I write it like that, she should be able to guess with her sharp mind.

《I've played this game several times with the same players. Now's the fourth time.》

Yuuri-san widens her eyes. Then, comprehension slowly starts to dwell in her eyes, but at the same time she starts to tremble in fear.

《Therefore, I also know a lot about you》

Yuuri-san shakes her head frantically as if to deny what I wrote. Then, she demands the pen herself.

《right! i would never tell anyone about my ex!》

《Under usual circumstances, yes. But are you really confident about not telling anyone in an abnormal situation such as this?》

“-----gh!”

《I’ve been with you for three games. Therefore, I believe I know you pretty well.》

《That’s also why I noticed something.》

Why was Iroha-san suddenly so unapproachable when it came to our [Secret Meeting]?

I figured that out when I looked at the name of the person she had the previous [Secret Meeting] with.

《You talked Iroha-san into building groups, didn’t you?》

“Wha---”

She quickly covers her mouth with her left hand before even more slips out. She then starts to nervously write on the memo book without removing her hand from her mouth.

《what are you talking about? do you want to say that it's my fault that it became like this? everything? there's no way i could do that!》

《The Yuuri-san I know can do that.》

Of course it's not like she knew everything. She would have never been able to predict that Iroha-san would cut off her own finger.

But knowing Iroha-san's personality so well, she should at least have been able to guess the following as well:

《At least you should have known that Iroha-san would try to bring us under her rule.》

Yuuri-san turns her gaze to the ground and closes her mouth.

《The Yuuri-san I know uses others to survive.》

《Even Iroha-san.》

When she has no other choice in order to survive.

That is because unlike Iroha-san, she can't possibly become the 《king》 herself. With her personality it's impossible to rule over the others and unite the wills of all the members.

However, she is able to control the person that has become the 《king》.

That's why she tried making Iroha-san the 《king》. She tried to control us indirectly. She planned to ensure her own safety by that.

She still doesn't raise her head and keeps silent.

After that, she didn't move for a while. But before I knew, her breath has calmed down again.

“.....”

She moves her arm at ease and starts to wordlessly write something on the memo book.

《i'll assume that you experienced three games. and i'll assume that you know me well.》

She slowly tears off the sheet and writes on the new one.

《so what?》

She raises her head.

“---uh”

I freeze.

Because her eyes were the blank eyes I've seen once before.

《if i apologize now and cry “i'll do as you say,” will you be satisfied? if so, i can do that for you as much as you want!》

And then, really, tears appear in her eyes. After making this truly sad-looking face, she writes following.

《it's a child's play》

“-----”

Oh, wow.

I've already lost.

《Listen, that's not what I》

Yuuri-san doesn't even look at what I'm writing anymore. After falling into silence, she stuck a half-hearted smile on her face and lay down on her bed.

“Uh...”

I planned to make her give in to..., no, I didn't even want to go that far. I just wanted to make her realize the truth and become my ally. Then, I wanted to do something about Iroha-san, taking this as a foothold.

But I obviously mistook the means.

Sure, if I had just directly told her the truth, she wouldn't have believed it. But, was there really no other way? Why of all things did I choose to attack this fearful girl?

«No, you hold a grudge against those guys that deceived you and killed brutally, don't you? They tried to kill you for their own life's sake even! Hehehe»

I recall what Noitan said to me.

Perhaps he was right? Did I unconsciously prefer to consider them as enemies I have to defeat instead of friends I have to save? And that's also the reason I attacked her?

If so... I might have been caught by the trap of this damned 'Game of Idleness' without noticing.

### **►Second Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Maria Otonashi], [Kazuki Hoshino]'s room**

Maria enters my room bad-tempered, with her arms crossed.

“...Finally. Finally I can properly speak with you. Geez... what's going on in your head? You should have come to me directly to discuss things first. But no, you--  
\_”

Maria stops and frowns.

“What’s with that gloomy face?”

So my face looks that depressed, after all?

The shock of my failure was so big that I was sitting on my bed, hanging my head.

“Hah... you’re overflowing with fretfulness. So, what happened? Did Yanagi turn you down?”

“Turned down, huh... well, yeah, something like that, I guess.”

She looks surprised for a moment because she was just joking, but then she lets out a deep sigh.

“You were already making a move on her...? Well, that’s what it means to be a natural philanderer, huh. Did you think you could succeed because she looks so helpless? What an embarrassing misunderstanding. With those looks, she must be idolized by a whole bunch of guys. Someone like you with a preference for female clothing stands no chance.”

...no, it was you who forced me to wear that get-up.

But I don’t even have the energy to retort and keep silent, my face still downcast.

“...in the first place, how dare you fall in love with a girl you met only yesterday? If it was Mogi, at least...”

“Eh...?”

I reflexively raise my head because she became silent. Maria scratches her nose and scowls in my direction, whereupon she sits down next to me with excessive vigor.

She wordlessly punches my shoulder.

“Kazuki, buy me a strawberry tarte.”

And tries to scrounge from me for some reason.

“.....”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m saying that I’ll keep you company because you lost so embarrassingly. I’ll be so kind as to listen to your pathetic excuses that dumped losers use all the time. Like that you didn’t really care about her, or that she wasn’t all that cute. A strawberry tarte is actually pretty cheap if you think of it as payment for the trouble I’ll have by enduring your unsightly state of mind.”

“...no, err---”

“I don’t know about Yanagi, but I’ll be with you. That’s what I’m saying.”

Maria says so with a composed face.

Since she says it so bluntly, as if it’s nothing special, I can’t help but be surprised by her kind words. But then I smile because she cares so much.

Right. It’s not the situation to be depressed. Indeed, I lost. But it should not be too late yet. I still have ways and means to use - without making a mistake this time.

In order to protect Maria.

“Sorry, Maria. It’s not like I confessed to her and was turned down.”

“...I know. There’s no way you’d have enough guts to do it. That was merely a joke to cheer you up.”

Wasn’t she dumbfounded just now...?

“So, what happened between you and Yanagi?”

“I failed at persuading her.”

Maria suspiciously raises an eyebrow.

“Yanagi? Not Shindou?”

I nod. When I answer like this, Maria holds her chin with her hand and ponders for a while.

“Why? Could you conclude that that was a necessary step to take by considering your available information? ...Ah, right. To begin with, I wanted to ask you what on earth you actually know.”

“Ah, yeah...”

“Spill it.”

Maria’s face tells that she’s profoundly convinced that I’m going to rely on her and tell her absolutely everything.

That’s certain. Having spent a whole lifetime together with me, she can see through me.

However---

“...Sorry, but I’d rather not tell you.”

I have since experienced several tragedies she doesn’t know of.

I was shown several times that I must protect her.

“.....what... are you saying? You won’t tell me? Why?”

“I think I mustn’t depend on you each and every time.”

“...why is that? That’s not a problem of depending or not, is it? Isn’t it obvious that it’s better trying to find a solution together than alone!”

It sounds perfectly reasonable. With my brains, I might make another mistake just like before. I’m aware that my own abilities are unreliable.

But what would happen if I told her about our situation? For example, what if I told her that she's just an NPC? She would certainly consider herself replaceable and would neglect herself even more than she already does!

I can't let her do that. Everyone has to survive.

Maria's self-sacrificing actions---stand in the way of reaching my goal.

Therefore, I can't tell her after all.

It's best when Maria acts as little as possible.

"-----"

Maria opens her mouth with a sad expression.

"...did I hurt your pride by helping you out all the time? Do you think that I look down on you? If I acted in a way that made it seem to you like that, I apologize."

"I've never thought like that!"

"Then...!"

She probably didn't mean to burst out like that. Maria averts her eyes awkwardly and continues more calmly.

"...then... depend on me!"

".....Maria."

...perhaps, I would have considered those words strong and reliable in the past.

But now I can't think like that anymore. It even looks like the opposite to me.

I know, after all.

I know Maria's aware that it's nothing but selfish talking.

Hence, her previous statement---

“I will save you!”

---was just a sad cry really.

Well, that’s how I see it, but that doesn’t change what I have to do.

“...Maria, can you keep silent about the ‘box’ for a while? I think it’s dangerous to tell Iroha-san about it.”

“...you have no intention of clearing me up?”

“.....yeah.”

When I say so, Maria drops her gaze and crosses her arms.

“...I see. You must have thought about it, so it can’t be helped, I guess.”

Suppressing her feelings, she tries to accept it.

She is, however, not able to fully conceal the bitterness on her face.

Maria stares at me, acting expressionless. Our relationship isn’t so shallow that I wouldn’t notice the sadness in her eyes.

And then, she says,

“You are... Kazuki, right?”

She, who has always been able to look right through me as if she could read my mind, --- who, during the ‘Sevennight in Mud’, even told me that she could recognize me by the usage of my facial muscles --- said that.

“.....eh?”

So, just shocked... shocked that she said such a thing,  
I'm left completely dumbfounded.

Maria averts her eyes.

With her gaze turned away, she whispers weakly,  
"...nothing. Please forget it."

### ►Second Day <F> [Kazuki Hoshino]'s room

Since the [Secret Meeting], Maria's attitude hasn't particularly changed.

I'm sure that statement was just a tiny verbal slip.  
Proof of that is that she didn't tell anyone about the 'boxes'.

Because no one aggravated the situation, things stayed the same.

But that's only for today.

Iroha-san demands an answer regarding the question of whether to join the 《group》 or not on the third day.

But anyway, today has ended.

I collapse on my bed.

Second day, no victims.

►Third Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Daiya Oomine], [Kazuki Hoshino]'s room

[Iroha Shindou]	->	[Daiya Oomine]	15:40~16:10
[Yuuri Yanagi]	->	[Iroha Shindou]	16:20~16:50
[Daiya Oomine]	->	[Kazuki Hoshino]	15:00~15:30
[Kazuki Hoshino]	->	[Yuuri Yanagi]	15:40~16:10
[Koudai Kamiuchi]	->	[Iroha Shindou]	15:00~15:30
[Maria Otonashi]	->	[Daiya Oomine]	16:20~16:50

“...Did I really say I’d destroy my own ‘box’ if nobody dies until the <E>-block of the eighth day?”

“Yeah.”

When I nod, Daiya starts to ponder silently.

I could finally finish telling him everything about the ‘Game of Idleness’ this time. Originally, I planned to not tell him that he’s just an NPC, but Daiya noticed immediately that I was hiding something, so I had no choice but to tell him.

But Daiya didn’t mind that too much. Rather, he seemed to mind being the ‘owner’ of the ‘Game of Idleness’.

“.....Hey, Kazu. What did I say to you when I sent you off?”

“Why do you want to know that?”

“Stop nitpicking and just tell me, Kasu-Kazu.”

What? Now his insults even rhyme?

Trash

“...uuhm, when I told you that I would win, you countered with 《Absolutely impossible》. Those should have been the last words I exchanged with you.”

“Oh well, for you to win against me is about as impossible as the world rotating 10 times faster than now.”

Isn't that guy being too rude, right now?

“Which means that the 《real me》 believes it's impossible that nobody kills in [Kingdom Royale], huh.”

“...I guess so.”

Still unable to fully understand, Daiya crosses his arms. Since he looks like he's pondering whether to believe me or not, I reluctantly ask,

“...will you believe me?”

Daiya raises his head and answers without relaxing his stern face.

“If you're really Kazuki Hoshino, then I have no other choice, I guess. After all, the Kazuki Hoshino I know isn't capable of thinking up such a story on the fly, and he can't lie on top of that.”

...in short, he believes me?

“...still, if you're Kazuki Hoshino... you really have changed.”

Unexpected words.

“Yeah, you're still an existence that repels others' wishes, but I feel like the reason behind that changed a little. I once told you that you look like you're floating, right? That feeling weakened a bit.”

“Why... is that?”

“I wouldn’t know! Perhaps something happened in this ‘box’ that changed you?”

“In this ‘box’...?”

The first thing that came to mind was Nana Yanagi.

While thinking that I’ve forgotten about her, having averted my eyes for so long, I’ve been captured by her all the while - by my first love.

I guess it’s not like I am completely released from her even now. I will try to be released by forgetting her once again.

But sure enough, I realized that I can’t escape. I clearly realized that fact.

Because of such a tiny change, I seem different to the others?

“To me it looks like a goal... no, a desire has evolved in you. If so, then you may not be able to master the ‘box’ anymore---”

Daiya stops mid-sentence.

“...what’s wrong?”

But as if words can’t reach him anymore, he’s petrified with his eyes wide open.

“.....master the ‘box’...? I see... so that’s...”

“Daiya...?”

But Daiya grasped his chin and was absorbed in pondering, ignoring me. When I gave up on expecting an answer and waited, he suddenly raised the corners of his mouth.

“Heh, hehe...”

I have no clue what the meaning of that chuckle is.

“Thanks, Kazu!”

“Eh?”

“It sure is easy to understand one’s own thoughts. Thanks to that, I just got what the 《real me》 is thinking.”

Daiya grins triumphantly while saying that.

Seeing that expression I can’t help but feel anxious.

...what? Is Daiya scheming something?

But the NPC Daiya and I are supposed have the same goal. He’s supposed to have believed me about the 《victory if no one dies until day 8》.

So, I wonder why.

Why does it feel like he won’t become my ally anymore?

### ►Third Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Yuuri Yanagi], [Yuuri Yanagi]'s room

The player is all alone.

He alone has information that gives him an advantage in fighting in the game, but he is unable to share it with the NPCs. Therefore, ultimately, he can only use the information to trick them.

So it might be natural that he’s going to fight alone.

Killing the NPCs in order to survive while being crushed by the feelings of guilt. I’m sure that’s the right way to fight in this game.

But I’m here to stop that. Because I think it’s the only way to save Maria. Because otherwise I would feel like having given in to the ‘box’.

But---Is it really possible to do that?

In this [Kingdom Royale] where you can make no allies?

I enter Yuuri Yanagi's room in a gloomy mood. She doesn't even look at me. While knowing it's futile, I write a message on a memo sheet.

“.....”

Yuuri Yanagi tears the paper, crumples it up and throws it away without reading it.

So she has no intention to respond to me anymore.

I bite on my lips.

How can I ever rule over her when I can't even communicate with her?

Should I try to make her listen to me by making clear that I just want to save her? ...No, that's futile. I started doubting those words myself, so there's no way they would reach her anymore.

“-----”

I clench my fist and look to the ground. Yuuri-san has noticed my discouragement but still doesn't even glance at me.

Is there no way left?

Have I already lost by now?

In the next <D>-block, Iroha-san is going to force us to join her 《group》. If it goes like she expects, I won't ever be able to become the 《king》.

Suddenly, I notice the memo book on the table, which probably belongs to Yuuri-san. On it, this was written:

《iroha is the [revolutionary]》

I realized the meaning of this right off.

In other words, Yuuri-san's saying:

---If you step in, I'll kill you.

I guess she's telling the truth. Iroha-san was only able to proclaim her rule because she didn't have to worry about getting killed --- in short, because she's the [Revolutionary]. Furthermore, I suppose Yuuri-san's either the [King] or the [Sorcerer]. After knowing about that [class] distribution, Iroha-san surely concluded that she won't be killed.

And, a girl that can even cut off her own finger will also be able to kill me if it's necessary.

I confirm my present condition. I have made about everyone my enemy. Yuuri-san's obvious, but also Iroha-san and Koudai Kamiuchi are my enemies, and I don't know what Daiya is thinking, just as always. And I can't allow myself to depend on Maria, who supposedly is my only ally.

In such a condition everything I do will backfire.

So, can I not become the 《king》 anymore?

“.....ugh...”

Even while telling myself not to give up, I can't think of a way to turn the situation around.

It's just too hopeless.

I fall on my knees at last.

It isn't possible anymore. I'll leave the throne to Iroha-san. I don't think that will turn out well, but it's better than moving myself. I should follow Iroha-san and pray to the heavens that Daiya and Koudai Kamiuchi won't get into mischief.

I should act like a mere stone and do nothing at all, just be there.

I have --- lost already.

I raise my head to beg for pardon.

Then they enter my sight. Yuuri-san's eyes which are looking down on me enter my sight.

---hollow eyes enter my sight.

“-----ah”

Thanks to that, I get it.

«No, you hold a grudge against those guys that deceived you and killed brutally, don't you? They tried to kill you for their own life's sake even! Hehehe»

I suddenly get the answer to those words.

---No. I don't hold a grudge against them. But... I will smash them up until they give in to me.

When I tormented Yuuri-san yesterday, I thought it was because I may have already given in to the 'box'. That I was prepared to defeat her.

But that's not true.

Didn't I always know so clearly? My mission is not to be gentle to these people that are merely NPCs.

It's to rescue the real ones.

《Please kill me.》

In the second round, the 《real Yuuri-san》 said that to me. The 'Game of Idleness' drove her that far into a corner that she had to ask for that.

But was the 'Game of Idleness' really the only reason for her suffering?

It was not. Something was already tormenting her when she was in the real world. I know that now. Because I've learned one thing in this pointless, worthless 'box'.

Things can't be undone. Yuuri-san's sin for killing Iroha-san and the others won't ever disappear.

But isn't it possible to analyze and solve that problem she brought with her from the real world?

Wouldn't doing that ease her pain a little?

For that sake, I'll win.

And I won't shun smashing up the NPCs.

That will become proof that I kept reality, my everyday life, in sight. That will become proof that I didn't give in to something like the 'Game of Idleness'.

Which means,

“-----hehe”

I haven't lost at all yet.

I stand up.

The players of this game are indeed alone. But I couldn't care less.

I'm the only one here who can possibly destroy the 'Game of Idleness', no matter how hopeless the situation may be. Other than me, nobody can save the others.

If so... I'll do it.

I'll save everyone, and making Yuuri-san give in is the first step.

".....what's with that smile?"

Yuuri-san is still looking at me with hollow eyes.

Thank you. I could only notice thanks to those eyes. I noticed that she's suffering because she has gotten used to suppressing her true self. I was able to confirm that I want to do something about that.

Still smiling, I roughly tear off the sheet on which 《iroha is the revolutionary》 is written and rip it to pieces in front of her eyes, making as much sound as possible.

The hollowness in her eyes gets replaced by astonishment.

Yeah, that's how it should be.

I won't let her make those hollow eyes again!

"Yuuri Yanagi."

She widens her eyes and gazes at me when I suddenly call her by her full name.

"You shall become nourishment for the real Yuuri-san."

As I know her very well, I know how she's going to react.

".....Ah..."

Aah, as expected, you made your face become pale, scaredy-cat.

You're not composed enough to ignore me anymore, right?

"For this sake, I'll destroy Iroha-san's 《group》 system. First, I'll start now with the work to make you leave it."

After being at a loss of words for a whole few seconds, she finally manages to object.

"W-What are you---T-There's no way I would leave! Besides that, I can't!"

"I said I'll 'make' you leave."

"If I tell her that... Y-You're going to get killed by Iroha, you know...? She's someone who might really do... no, she will definitely do it, you know?"

It seems she doesn't have enough composure to notice that this conversation will be heard by Iroha-san anyway.

"I know!"

"T-Then why do you say something like that?! That's suicide!"

"Because I'll also defeat her, of course. I won't be killed then."

Yuuri-san opens her eyes wide.

And shakes her head fiercely.

"Impossible... that's absolutely impossible. If you knew... if you knew how often I've experienced that already..."

Right---

That's it.

I finally realize the origin of her suffering is this mud sticking to her.

“So, if I defeat Iroha-san.....”

The origin of the hollow eyes. It's---

“If I defeat Iroha-san, will you be able to prevail over your envy towards her?”

---her inferiority complex towards Iroha-san.

It's a sensation I can comprehend very well, being close to Maria and Daiya. We have to realize all the time that we can't reach them, and fight with the fear of seeming all so little compared to them.

Even worse, unlike me she's number 2. It must have been even harder to endure, always being just a small step behind.

Her distance from Iroha Shindou - she seems so close and yet she's out of reach.

Just how vexing is it to feel this all the time?

《Right, an idiot like me should better keep silent... everyone, I'm sorry for upsetting you.》

In the first round she called herself an idiot. She always looked very unsure despite being most intelligent and commendable from my point of view.

Because she's always been comparing herself with someone she can't reach.

“-----Ah”

So was she aware of it, after all?

Yuuri-san is trembling so hard in disturbance, she's almost pitiful.

"You wanted to win against Iroha-san in something no matter what, right?"

Yuuri-san shrugs when I say so.

"You wanted to win against Iroha-san. You always wanted to win. Therefore, you also wanted to do so in this game. You thought for yourself that you could call it a win if you managed to control Iroha-san. Hence you operated accordingly."

I'm sure that's also why she deceived Iroha-san when she was the player and made Iroha-san suffer by telling her about her ex.

"S-Stop talking like you understand everything---"

She denies it uneasily, but with her usual acting-power having disappeared almost completely, it's very easy to read from her expression.

"But even now that everything went as planned, you didn't gain a feeling of victory at all."

"-----!!"

"You were simply overwhelmed. Because you were forced to realize just how petty your plan is compared to the unbelievable determination that let her cut off her own finger."

".....Stop."

"And after witnessing her sublimity, all you could think of was to survive by depending on her. Because she made you realize just how weak-minded and unimportant you are."

“Stop.”

“In the first place, it was already clear to you that you couldn’t possibly win. After all, you already knew that something like that would never suffice to wipe away your inferiority complex when it didn’t even disappear after stealing her crush.”

“Didn’t I tell you to stop!?”

Together with this scream, I feel a pain running over my cheek.

...did she just slap me?

I can’t believe it for a moment. No, I mean, Yuuri-san slapped me? She, who can control herself more than anyone?

And she herself widened her eyes in surprise of what she did. She’s silently staring at her hand while closing and opening it.

“---Ah...”

Then, her shoulders start to shake.

“I-I’m sorry---”

Even before she could end her sentence, tears started to well up from her eyes.

“.....I’m... sorry. But, please... stop already.... please don’t say such cruel things anymore... please don’t trample on my feelings... please... please...”

I bet it’s tough.

Tough to see her own unsightly feelings.

After all it’s something she couldn’t even confess to me when she disclosed her fraud in the second round.

But,

“No.”

Why should that matter?

Exactly because she’s begging me not to, I have to trample even more.

“Uh... aah...”

After hearing my cold words, Yuuri-san crouches down while crying and hides her face.

“If I let you go now, I won’t be able to do anything for the real Yuuri-san. So, I don’t mind if you hide your face, but don’t cover your ears, okay?”

“Uh, uuh.....”

Of course it’s painful to see her suffer like this. But, even my own feelings don’t matter now.

“Do you want to know what you did in the second round when you were in my position?”

I give her the finishing blow.

“You killed Iroha-san.”

Her sobbing stops, whereupon she looks up to me with her reddened eyes.

“.....w-what are you saying...?”

I purposely keep silent.

“...k-killing her...? I would never go this far!

Certainly... I am a coward... but I wouldn’t be able to do something like that!”

She honestly believed so, without a doubt. And I’m sure she’s telling the truth. She could only do it because she was the player and the others, including Iroha-san, merely NPCs.

But even so, she did kill her.

Iroha-san got to know Yuuri-san as a mischievous girl that deceived and killed her.

This fact won't change anymore.

I guess she's realized that I'm telling the truth after looking at my face, being so good at reading from others' faces; she's fallen into silence and just continues to shed tears in an absentminded state.

But I continue to speak to her.

"Yuuri-san. I will tell you the details afterwards, but you and Iroha-san both won when you were players, so you already managed to survive."

Yuuri-san slightly reacts to those words. As it seems like she comprehends what I'm saying, I continue.

"But if we don't do anything, Iroha-san won't forgive you for having killed her. And you won't be able to forgive yourself either. It may sound fishy, but I want to help you with that!"

Then, I say,

"I thought about what to do about that!"

Yuuri-san's still shedding tears, but it seems like she could regain her will. She looks at me.

"Just grasp the right outcome. Speak your minds openly in this round, but after that you need to support and trust each other again. You just have to reach this outcome! If the both of you manage to trust each other in this game, you will be alright in the future. Iroha-san should be able to forgive you, Yuuri-san."

I say so calmly.

“Therefore, you have to tell her everything. Put all your emotions towards Iroha-san into words.”

I wait for her reply.

She finally opens her mouth after having kept silent for a long time.

“...I don’t, get it.”

She said so with a lifeless voice.

“That we have already survived or that we just have to trust each other - that all makes no sense to me.”

“...I see.”

Fair enough. She knows almost nothing about the circumstances; there’s no way she could understand.

“But---”

Hearing this contradictory conjunction, I raise my head.

She was smiling weakly.

“I don’t mind not understanding, anymore. I’m at my limit of thinking about such cruel things all the time just to survive... it’s enough already.”

Saying this, she suddenly embraces me.

“So... may I depend on you?”

Apparently she can’t properly control the strength of her embrace; it hurts.

This uncontrolled strength of hers seems forlorn to me.

And this surprises me.

No matter how hard it was, she’s always fought alone, with her own methods. Even though she’s always been anxious, she kept on fighting and withstood the

pressure on her heart. Even when she was the player, she deceived all the NPCs, cornered them, killed them and, when she was overwhelmed by her feelings of guilt, regained the will to fight and managed to win in the end.

Yuuri Yanagi is such a strong girl.

“Save... me.”

In spite of that, she can't do anything but depend on me anymore.

She can't do anything but cling to the frail hope in front of her eyes, without controlling anyone.

Her condition reminded me a bit of someone.

It reminded me of 《Nana Yanagi》.

But I won't mix 《Yuuri-san》 and 《Yanagi-san》 up anymore.

For the sake of saving no one other than 《Yuuri-san》, I return her embrace and say,

“I will save everyone, absolutely!”

### ►Third Day <D> Big room

*You may find this surprising, but I was very self-confident until middle school. My grades were always the best and I played the piano so skillfully, I won prizes in various contests! I was the head of the wind instrument club and the student council president at the same time. I was surrounded by people that adored me all the time.*

*That might be the reason why I unconsciously considered myself special.*

*I was convinced that wouldn't change even when ascending to high school. But that 《special》 seat was nowhere prepared for me in high school life. Because Iroha Shindou sat on that seat since the time she gave the welcome speech of the freshmen during the entrance ceremony.*

*But naturally I didn't give up right away. I was confident in being able to regain this seat. Rather, I was even happy about having gained a rival.*

*With the belief that I would outstrip her in no time and become the number one again, I worked even harder than I did in middle school. I raised the time I would concentrate on learning before doing anything else. Of course I didn't just learn as long as possible; I also tried out various techniques to improve my effectiveness or to keep up my concentration while learning.*

*But I couldn't match her.*

*It was then when I finally started to get nervous. Because I wanted to win against her at least in grades, I stopped playing the piano which I had continued since elementary school, I stopped going to the literary club I had entered, I reduced the time I would play with my friends, I slept less and I even studied during breaks, prepared to be called wonk-chan.*

*But even so, Iroha stayed out of reach.*

*Even though Iroha took part in her club's activities, was busy with the student council and slept during classes, totally looking like she wasn't making such a big effort like me... I couldn't reach her at all.*

*But actually it wasn't that strange. In mock examinations, there were usually almost 100 people with better results than me, despite my great effort. There were many better pianists than me as well, and just turning on the television I would see much more beautiful women than me, one after the other. It was certainly not only Iroha whom I couldn't reach. Thus, it wasn't strange that it came like that.*

*I was merely taught by her that I'm nothing more than an ordinary person. That I'm not special.*

*Thanks to Iroha, I was able to graduate from my embarrassing conceit. I think I would have noticed that even without Iroha sooner or later.*

*But still, it was mortifying.*

*It was terribly mortifying.*

*Why wasn't I the special one?*

*Because I'd needed so much time to notice, I had already lost everything. I had lost my friends, my hobbies, my special abilities, and instead I had become a boring girl that was relatively bright but nothing more.*

*At that time, I noticed that Iroha was in love with someone. She tried to hide it, but to me it was more than obvious. And at the very moment when I took notice of Iroha's feelings, that boy looked incredibly charming to me. Because I thought that he had to be lovely if he managed to steal Iroha's heart.*

*If he had the choice between Iroha and me, who would he choose...?*

*- When I thought that, a wicked thought crossed my mind.*

*If that boy chose me---*

*Wouldn't that mean that I'm more attractive than Iroha?*

*I was aware of the hideousness of my scheme. But even so, I couldn't stop myself from going through with it.*

*Because I wanted to see!*

*I wanted to see Iroha, who always seemed out of reach, become the loser for once and be jealous of me.*

*I wanted her to realize.*

*Realize that there are people below her that are mortified because they can't reach her no matter what they do.*

*And then I managed to go out with him.*

*I pretended to be beside myself with joy and told Iroha about it with an innocent look as if I had no idea of her feelings towards him. In my mind I was chuckling because I highly expected to see her grind her teeth bitterly. It really makes me want to puke when I think back on how I was at that time.*

*'Come on Iroha, feel bitter! Envy me! Hate me!'*

*- Everything was right. Everything was right as long she just directed negative emotions towards me. Iroha's reaction, however, was completely different from my expectations.*

*“Congratulations!”*

*She said with a gentle smile and stroked my head.*

*Of all things, Iroha --- blessed my fulfilled love.*

*She blessed me.*

*Me!*

*Although I was always absorbed in planning her misfortune.*

*Unable to believe it, not wanting to believe it, I still continued to try. I continued to make use of him while pretending not to notice that my love for him was just a misunderstanding. But even so, no matter what kind of advice I asked her for, no matter when I told her that we had split up - she would just root for me.*

*And each time she did so, I was shown it.*

*The things I pretended not to see - my ugliness, my pettiness, my wretchedness - were made clearer and stronger to me by Iroha's radiance.*

*Aah, I know, I know. No matter how painful it was for me --- I'm not the poor victim but the despicable culprit.*

*But, I can't stop.*

*I can't retreat.*

*Because I don't want to admit that I've descended from an ordinary person to a hopeless coward after committing so many sins.*

*I'm not thinking that my sins will be forgiven and I will stop being a coward if I win against Iroha.*

*But I have no other choice anymore. There is no way back.*

*I mean, isn't it true?*

*I'm sorry.*

*I'm sorry.*

*My sin isn't so light that it could be forgiven with just those words.*

“And that should make me forgive you?”

Iroha-san laughs coldly in the big room where all members have gathered.

I suppose she has listened to Yuuri-san's confession that was recorded on her portable terminal.

“Do you think I'll forgive your deceit if you put on display how miserable you are?”

Maria, Daiya and Koudai Kamiuchi can only watch as they don't know the circumstances.

“I won't, you bitch!”

She says and spits on Yuuri-san who was forced to kneel in her white underwear.

Yuuri-san's only looking downwards while trembling without saying anything back. Her left cheek's swollen - I guess she was slapped by Iroha-san in her room.

It's painful to watch this. After all, I've known that this could happen. Therefore, this is also my responsibility.

But if I can't even bear this much, I won't be able to oppose Iroha-san.

“.....Hey, Shindou, what on earth happened?”

Maria opens her mouth, unable to endure this sight any longer.

“It’s no big deal, really. This is just what happens when you join my 《group》, vowing me obedience, and still dare to disobey my order.”

“But isn’t that too harsh...?”

As if in defiance of Maria’s advice, Iroha-san presses the sole of her shoe against Yuuri-san’s head.

“Uh...,” Yuuri-san groans, which just drives Iroha-san to click her tongue and wordlessly apply more pressure, squeezing Yuuri-san’s forehead against the ground.

Yuuri-san looks almost like she’s genuflecting.

“Who said it’s okay to open your mouth? You ought to just hang your head like an ornament. Do I even need to teach you by force until you get it?”

“S-Stop it, Shindou!”

“I won’t. ...anyway. You know already, right? The time’s up. You will all be put under my rule in this time-block. It’s the best way I can think of so there’s no need to change it, no matter what this dirty bitch thinks!”

Iroha-san declares with her foot still on top of Yuuri-san’s head.

“And then I will end this game for you by becoming the 《king》.”

Right, Iroha-san’s this kind of human.

Like this, she treats someone whom she considered a dear friend until just now according to what she needs to to achieve her goal.

Of course it's not like she doesn't feel anything in doing so. She should be deeply hurt and also deeply remorseful. But she seals those emotions. Iroha-san is able to control even her own emotions temporarily for the sake of her goal.

That's something I realized in the third round when she killed everyone on the first day to become the winner.

Right, that's why I was able to predict it.

Predict that she would take this action.

Therefore, I'll---

"Impossible!"

---pull her from the false throne.

Iroha-san slowly removes her foot from Yuuri-san's head and throws me a sharp glance. Without a doubt the intent to kill dwells in that fiery look.

"...does this possibly mean that you don't plan to join my 《group》? Too bad. You're going to die!"

"No, that's not what I meant. I merely told the truth! I mean, someone as soft as you could never rule over others!"

"Soft? What are you talking about?"

Her scowl really gives me the creeps. But to seem as calm as possible, I relax my mouth.

"I'm talking about your soft reaction to Yuuri-san's betrayal! You only stripped her clothes off, punched her, spit on her and put your foot on her head? That's what all call soft!"

Iroha-san flashes a smile to display her composure, too.

“So what do I need to do so that you’re satisfied?”

I then say in order to erase that smile of hers,

“Kill her!”

As planned, Iroha-san’s smile vanishes and she widens her eyes.

“Right at the beginning... didn’t you threaten to flush away everyone’s food in the toilet as soon someone shows only a single sign of betraying you? But you didn’t do that, did you? You especially put on such a show with putting Yuuri-san into her underwear, so I bet you didn’t do it, right?”

Iroha-san flashes a grin.

“...Haha. It’s just a show as soon as I don’t really flush away the food and kill her? Your thinking is quite distorted, huh? Why can’t you understand that flushing away the food is a so-called ‘exaggerated expression?’ Don’t you get that it was something necessary to say at that time, even without actually planning to do it?”

“Even if it’s like that, aren’t you practically displaying to us that your 《group》 has no binding force anymore by showing us this soft treatment of Yuuri-san?”

“.....What do you mean? Do you want me to kill Yuuri?”

“No way. I’m just pointing out that---”

I tell them plainly,

“---such a 《group》 system is flawed to begin with.”

“.....”

Iroha-san silently crosses her arms. With her fast understanding, she should know that she's going to be overwhelmed by me if she can't counter.

But she can think as much she wants. There's no way to turn it around anymore!

That's because what I said is 100% correct.

"...what exactly is flawed, then?"

Her voice sounds slightly weaker than before.

"The 《group》 is based on trust in you. But there's never been any. You made this plan on the preconception of something that doesn't even exist. That's why it's flawed. Or am I wrong?"

"....."

Just one more push.

Just one more push should be enough to pull Iroha Shindou, who was able to kill everyone or to cut off her own finger just to persuade the others, from her false throne.

---and yet,

And yet, Iroha-san raised the corner of her mouth. To show me that she's as cool as a cucumber.

"Yes, it might be hard to maintain the 《group》 system. I admit that! But so what? If it's too hard to create those 《groups》, then I just need to abandon this plan and make a new one. Or do you think I am not capable of doing so?"

"....."

That was a counter I wasn't able to predict.

She doesn't give up just by being cornered this far.

“Anyway, there is no reason for me to give in to you.”

I guess so...

There’s no way she would give in to me because of something of this degree. That’s because Iroha-san is the one who should be defeated first, and --- the strongest enemy.

I can reach my goal if I can just do something about this strongest enemy. Daiya’s goal should match with mine after all, and with the help of Iroha-san and Yuuri-san, we should be able to suppress Koudai Kamiuchi’s whims far enough so he won’t go as far as to kill.

The hardest thing is always to get onto the tracks. As soon as you’re on them, the rest’s not as difficult anymore.

And the first step I need to get onto the rails is to get past Iroha-san.

If I manage to do that, I will be able to achieve my goal.

So I will definitely not retreat. I have cornered her without a doubt, so I will definitely not retreat.

I search for the last push.

“.....”

I look at Yuuri-san, who’s trembling and has her head pressed against the ground.

---Aah, I see.

It doesn’t even matter how much Iroha-san tries to persist, does it?

“...so, will you abandon Yuuri-san? In order to save yourself and the others?”

After all, she's already aware of her defeat.

Iroha-san answers without wavering,

“Yeah.”

Which is the affirmation I have expected.

And which is an obvious lie.

A lie she begs me to see through.

“You can't trick me like that.”

So I'll put an end to it now.

“I told you before, right? Kill Yuuri-san.”

“-----”

“If you really want to abandon Yuuri-san, show us now. You just have to make us kneel down by impressing us with your force... by killing her, just like you cut off your finger.”

Iroha-san.

Iroha-san must be thinking that she's best suited for being the 《king》. It's because she thinks so that she takes the lead. She's doing that because she thinks it's the most probable way for her to achieve her goal.

But what if she considered someone else suited for being the 《king》?

I bet she would hand over the throne to the respective person.

That's why she's testing me.

She's testing whether I'm suited for the throne, whether I can see through such a blatant lie.

“.....haha...”

Iroha-san raises a laugh.

“...well yeah, I can’t! Thus, I can’t become the 《king》 anymore.”

Like that---

Iroha-san handed over the throne to me.

Iroha-san sits down alone on an empty seat, lips pursed.

“Hah...,” she sighs artificially and flashes a wry smile.

“...Iroha, lost...?”

Yuuri-san’s widening her eyes, looking at Iroha-san who’s sitting there having given up. The girl in underwear stands up, walks to Iroha-san and looks down to her.

“.....why? Why don’t you kill me? You would do this much, wouldn’t you...? If it’s to achieve your goal, you would do this much, wouldn’t you?”

After hearing that, Iroha-san smiles wryly.

“Yuuri. What is my goal?”

She asks, while looking away and leaning her elbow on the desk.

“Eh? To become the 《king》 ... right?”

“Of course not! That is just a means to achieve my goal.”

“I-I see. But then---

Iroha-san then speaks to the confused Yuuri-san with a gentle smile, like a parent that’s patiently explaining multiplication to a child,

“My goal is to protect you, Yuuri.”

Yuuri-san gets even more confused.

Because this was just way too unexpected for her.

But I knew it.

In the very last moment before she died during the first game, she said 《...sorry that I couldn't save you.》 to me, despite it being the last moment of her life.

These words showed me that her goal is to protect Yuuri-san.

Of course she also tried to protect our and her own life. But considering her lifestyle, she would surely prioritize others. And she would surely want to save Yuuri-san more than some people she just met that day.

Therefore, she would never kill Yuuri-san, even if it means that she becomes unable to retain the 《group》 system.

Yuuri-san shakes her head, unable to believe it.

“T-That's a lie! D-Do you realize that I betrayed you? Isn't that also why you got angry and made me get naked and slapped me and...”

“Yuuri, are you making fun of me?”

“Eh?”

“Do you want to say that I would change my goal because of emotional swings? You think of me as such a greenhorn? In order to retain the 《group》, I simply had to punish you symbolically in some way for

cooperating with Hoshino-kun. Wasn't stripping your clothes a nice performance, being easy to visually understand and all?"

"....."

"Well, what I did there was a vain struggle. I was convinced that you would silently follow me, you know. I didn't imagine that you could ever fall into Hoshino-kun's hands. Therefore, I already lost in that instance!"

Yuuri-san intensively stares at Iroha-san who said so--but still seems unable to understand and shakes her head.

"...I don't get it! Protecting my life is your goal? Even if it was like that in the beginning, there's no way you would still think so after learning about my deceit. You would never save an atrocious person like me."

"You know what, Yuuri? You're an idiot."

Iroha-san sighs.

"Ueh...?"

"It's so simple you shouldn't even need to think about it."

But when Yuuri-san still remains clueless, Iroha-san scratches her head.

"...aah, jeez! Then tell me, have you ever thought from my point of view?"

"Your point of view...?"

"Right. Yuuri, you said that your grades have always been the best. It was the same for me! I, too, have always been the best!"

Yuuri-san seems unable to grasp Iroha-san's intention and is still perplexed.

"I wanted to stay on that seat as well! But imagine there's still someone pursuing you at high-speed. You have no other choice but to try your best then, right? You don't want to lose then, right? Just what do you think of how frantically I worked in the shadows to protect my seat?"

Surprise is painted in Yuuri-san's face.

"That you couldn't reach me even while trying your best is because I'm special? That has nothing to do with it! In my opinion, you haven't set yourself a proper goal, Yuuri! If you're asked what you want to become and what you want to achieve by learning, can you answer right away? I bet you can't! Well, because you just thought about winning against me and nothing else."

"I....."

"There's no way you could win against me with such low aspirations. You made every effort? You're not in the position to say that! It's nowhere near enough! Folks that really spared no pains don't say shit like there was nothing to them!"

".....so, will I be able to become like you if I put more effort into it?"

"Aah, jeez! Are you even listening to me? There's no way you could become like me, is there? I am me. You are you. Everyone has his own qualifications and

abilities, so it's absolutely impossible to become the same as someone else no matter how enviable he may be. No matter how enviable I am, you can't become me!"

"I guess you're right. Someone like me could never become like---"

When Iroha-san hears these words, she stands up with a scowl. She then grasps Yuuri-san's shivering shoulders with a bloodcurdling expression on her face.

"O-Ouch!"

"Right! No matter how enviable---"

She roars.

"I can't become like you!"

Yuuri-san's pain-contorted expression disappears and she cannot help but gaze at Iroha-san with widened eyes instead.

"Did I seem calm when I heard that you started going out with him? Did I look like I was purely congratulating you? If so, I succeeded. Not giving my blessings to a dear friend's fulfilled love would be a disgrace, after all."

"I-Iroha...?"

Iroha-san's formerly firm expression has already crumbled. She, who managed to look calm even when the 《group》 system failed, has seriously lost her temper.

"Do you really think there is anyone who wouldn't be mortified when her crush is stolen from her? Of course it was mortifying, even for me! Of course I envied you!"

But, what should I have done? He chose you, after all! I was like 《Well, of course》 when I heard about it. Can you understand that mentality of mine? Can you understand my mentality of being unsurprised that he would choose you? Or do you even think I wasn't mortified at seeing me like that? But I'm not you, Yuuri, so I had no choice but to give up!

What's that, Yuuri?! Even though you're good at reading others' expressions, why do you only fail to understand that? You wanted me to be jealous of you? Aren't you completely dumb? I... I! Since the entrance ceremony, since the very first moment I saw you---

She grasps her shoulders even stronger and shouts.

“I was jealous of you!”

Yuuri-san is still unable to comprehend and just stares at Iroha-san.

I bet it's unbelievable for Yuuri-san. I bet it's not so easy for her to believe that the person she considered a superhuman and definitely out of her reach, envied her from the very start.

---Sorry, Yuuri-san. But I knew!

《The first person I respected and found enviable...and probably, was jealous of, was Yuuri.》

I knew since the first round.

Therefore, I also knew what's wrecking them is that they misunderstand each other.

“Even I would like to depend on someone! But for some reason I find myself unable to do so. And each time I think about that... your face comes to mind!”

She says and lets go of her shoulders.

Suddenly, astonishment starts to dwell in Yuuri-san’s face that were fixed on Iroha-san.

“Iroha... why are you cry-”

“Haha, what’re you talking about? There’s no way I would---”

Probably with the intention of tagging along with what she believed was a joke, Iroha-san touches her cheek.

And opens her eyes wide.

Because she noticed that she really was crying.

“No way... I am crying...? I can’t remember having cried, actually, ever. There’s no way I would cry, especially in front of others, and still...”

But she is shedding tears.

She is really shedding tears.

It’s an indubitable fact that Iroha-san is crying.

Iroha-san’s expression crumbles.

“Uh.....”

Her always-strained face crumbles like a child’s.

“Uah... uaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

She cries out loud.

*That* Iroha-san does.

Iroha-san who could even cut off her finger for the sake of her goal.

Unable to suppress her emotions, she cries like a little child.

“I-Iroha...?”

“Uaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Yuuri you silly silly silly silly! I trusted you! I... was convinced like an idiot that only you would never betray me!”

She sheds a huge amount of tears and has a dripping nose.

“And yet, and yet! A superhuman! Who’s that!? I mean, stop kidding meee! Why don’t you get mee! I don’t want to become some 《king》 either! I’m frightened of this killer game! It hurt to cut off my finger! I wish there was someone who protected me! But I had to do it even without wanting to, right!? I thought I was best suited for becoming the 《king》, so I had no other choice but to take the responsibility, right?! I didn’t want everyone to die because I depended on someone, Yuuri, so I had no other choice, right?!”

Not a bit of her usual incredibility is left in the appearance of her wailing like a child.

Yuuri-san asks, still astonished.

“Iroha... what makes you want to protect someone like me...?”

Hearing this somehow strange question, Iroha-san scowls at her with bright red eyes.

“Isn’t that obvious?!”

I suddenly recall something I heard from Iroha-san during the first round.

《What do you think? Did I really --- like Yuuri?》

I didn't know the answer to that question until now. The experiences of the third round alone weren't enough to comprehend Iroha-san's true intentions, which she can control to an extent as to erase inconvenient emotions.

But I finally found out.

Seeing her bare emotions, I finally found out.

Iroha-san does---

“Because you're so incredibly dear to me that I want to protect you, of course!”

---love Yuuri-san.

“Because you're so dear to me that I would have to persuade myself that I hate you when I'm unable to protect you, just to endure it!”

Finally feelings return to Yuuri-san's eyes after being just perplexed all this time.

“Ah.....”

In the next moment, tears well up and wander down her cheeks. Just like Iroha-san, Yuuri-san's tears also start to flow fiercely in no time and stick to her entire face.

Those two---

---admired each other so much, for so long, that they became jealous of each other.

It may have also been the origin of some failures that occurred in this 'box', but naturally strong emotions made those strong feelings well up in them.

“Iroha... Irohaa.....”

She embraces her.

The two crying girls embrace each other.

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...”

“I don’t want to, hear that! I don’t want to hear an apology! I won’t forgive you with something like that! There’s something I want to hear much more than that.”

Yuuri-san’s at a loss for just a second, but then immediately realizes with her face dirty with tears and nasal mucus. She flashes a clumsy smile, that no one would call cute anymore, and gently whispers, unfolding the entirety of her heart,

“I also, like you from the bottom of my heart...”

Aah.

These words made me finally realize.

The meaning of Yuuri-san putting on Iroha-san’s watch in the second round. And also the reason why she confessed her sin of stealing Iroha-san’s loved one to her.

《---please kill me.》

To make it easier for Iroha-san to kill her.

I guess wanting to win against Iroha-san was also part of the reason. But it’s because she wanted to make it easier for Iroha-san to kill her NPC that she taught her specially, despite knowing that Iroha-san would become the player afterwards. She tried to save Iroha-san’s life even with the preparedness of being hated by her.

It’s not easy to do that. She wouldn’t have been able to do that...

“I have always... loved you!”  
...if she didn’t love Iroha-san.  
Heh.

It’s not even a question of forgiving or not. After all, that doesn’t matter as long they love each other.

Of course their relationship in reality won’t improve by that. Those two are just NPCs and not the two that are in despair right now.

But I can believe.

I can easily believe that they will have no problems to make up again and wipe the despair away.

And like that, I also had these thoughts.

Having overcome my strongest enemy and having made a first, certain step towards my goal, I was convinced:

I did it. I have doubtlessly gotten on the tracks and now I can achieve my goal. There’s no way for me to lose anymore.

Right---

I won against Daiya.



GAME START



Iroha Shindou



Maria Otonashi



Kazuki Hoshino



Daiya Oomine



Koudai Kamiuchi



Yuuri Yanagi

*“I will win against you, Daiya!”*

*Kazuki Hoshino said that.*

*I couldn't help but laugh out.*

*“Absolutely impossible.”*

*I am confident. Kazuki Hoshino has no chance of reaching his goal.*

*If he's really positive that he can win, then that's nothing but a mere delusion.*

*Kazuki Hoshino makes a basic misunderstanding.*

*Being able to stay in this room where one can watch over everything --- you may call it the Master Room --- I naturally know about this misunderstanding.*

*“.....heh.”*

*Still,*

*«Boredom --- there are people that blast their own brain out just to get rid of this beast.»*

*I like that phrase.*

*Indeed, boredom is a beast. If it wasn't, then I would surely not use the 'box' that can grant any 'wish' for something like a way to stave it off.*

*“Okay, I'll go then.”*

*Kazuki Hoshino says so and turns towards the screen. His face gets illuminated by the blue-white light that's coming from the cheap game machine.*

*Several transparent hands reach out for Kazuki Hoshino who's staring directly at the screen. While looking very discomforted about those hands that overflow from there*

*almost as if they wanted to devour him greedily, he gets drawn in. As if he was being plucked off by the hands, he slowly loses his color, gets transparent and eventually disappears.*

*Congratulations for that heroic determination.*

*But it's pointless, you know? Even if, by any chance, you manage to prevent everyone from killing, it would still be pointless.*

*The 'owner' of the 'Game of Idleness' isn't Daiya Oomine.*

*«'Natures' are like this. Every event changes its shape according to your nature. Things that you find enjoyable are pure boredom for people that have 'boredom' as their nature.»*

*«The 'box' can be no more than a way to kill time for people that are engulfed by boredom. Thus, this is only a game. A pointless game.»*

*It's me --- Koudai Kamiuchi.*

*Thanks for this lovely explanation of me, Oomine-senpai.*

*Heh, and Kazuki Hoshino misunderstood that. Our poor Hoshino-senpai got completely deceived by Daiya Oomine's cryptic wording! ☆*

*Right --- that's why he can't win.*

*It's only natural. How could he win when he mistook his enemy?*

*"Oomine-senpai."*

*When I call him, Daiya Oomine turns wordlessly around to me.*

*“What do you intend to do with Hoshino-senpai?”*

*“Why do you ask?”*

*Daiya Oomine moodily responds to my call.*

*“Weell, you see, listening to your exchange, I got a little confused. Um, you told him, «you can survive if nobody kills anyone during these eight days», right?”*

*“I told him, yeah.”*

*“But that’s a lie, isn’t it?”*

*Daiya Oomine doesn’t answer.*

*“I mean, there’s no way such a method would exist, is there? Or do you think I would create such a pointless escape route with this personality of mine?”*

*The game will be forced to end. His explanation was so persuasive, even I almost believed it. But thinking about it, it’s impossible that he would know of such an underhanded trick when he’s not even the ‘owner’.*

*In short, bullshit.*

*Daiya Oomine flashes an expression of joy.*

*Heh, there I was wondering what kind of expression he would show me and then that.*

*I can’t help but smile wryly as well. That guy just fed Kazuki Hoshino a random line, deceived him and now he’s laughing at him!*

*No wonder he easily won the first round when he’s like that.*

*“What the truth is does not matter. What matters is, whether Kazuki Hoshino believes it or not.”*

*“Well, he believed it readily. How pitiful. So, my question was why you did that.”*

*Daiya Oomine answers while scratching his head,*

*“Would you believe me if I told you that I just want to see how Kazu frantically runs around?”*

*“...hm? This phrasing means that it’s a lie?”*

*“It’s true.”*

*I don’t know whether he’s telling the truth or not, but the feeling I now have that it’s the truth is what makes me snort.*

*“You’re evil, aren’t you? Hoshino-senpai doesn’t stand a chance in various senses.”*

*“Well, yeah.”*

*He answers indifferently without any expression on his face.*

*But I guess that’s not the only reason. I know that he’s not such a shallow human. If it’s really true, then it’s one of the things he wants to do the most.*

*“By the way, why are you doing this here? Why did you want to have something like a guide-role for [Kingdom Royale]?”*

*This ‘box’ is able to summon the players to this room and suspends them until their turn actually arrives. But for some reason I was unable to suspend him like the others.*

*When I questioned him about that, he told me something about being able to interfere with others’ ‘wishes’ because he’s also an ‘owner’. Well, frankly speaking: what the fuck?*

*Then I asked him why Maria Otonashi, who seems to be an ‘owner’ as well, wasn’t able to do the same, but apparently it’s not like she can’t. Her turn has simply not come and she’s still suspended, therefore she didn’t have an opportunity to perceive the existence of this ‘box’ yet.*

*In other words, Daiya Oomine is only able to move because he was released from the «suspended» state once in order to play the first round.*

*Anyway, Daiya Oomine took advantage of this circumstance and did things like explaining [Kingdom Royale] to Kazuki Hoshino or shitting him.*

*“Don’t make me repeat myself. Didn’t I tell you it was because I want to see Kazu’s pathetic dance?”*

*“But that’s not all, right?”*

*“Then let me say this: I don’t intend to give you an answer.”*

*“Ooh! What a daring answer, considering I’m the ‘owner’ that lets you move freely! Do you understand your position? Well, even if you don’t want to answer, I don’t really care. It’s not like I’m that interested in it anyway.”*

*Everything’s right as long it seems interesting. In fact, it seems fun to watch Kazuki Hoshino be deceived and get frantic.*

*Apparently amazed that I withdrew so easily, Daiya Oomine sighs.*

*“...come to think of it, I forgot to ask. Why did you choose us as players?”*

*“Well, don’t you usually want to fight against as strong enemies as possible? The HARD-mode’s much more fun than the EASY-mode, isn’t it? Therefore, I’ve chosen the people from our school that are said to be brilliant.”*

*“What about Kazu? You can’t call him brilliant, can you?”*

*“Aah, yeah. To tell the truth, I originally wanted to choose someone else! Um, that second year «Ryuu Miyazaki». But since he’s not a student of our school anymore, I gave up on that. It’s better if the enemy characters have some sense of unity, don’t you agree?”*

*“Kazu in place of Miyazaki, huh. It would be hard to find anyone more inappropriate for that role.”*

*“Ah, you’re not being honest with yourself again, Oomine-senpai. I know that you value Hoshino-senpai pretty highly! Besides this, it’s not really like that. Sure enough, Hoshino-senpai isn’t even a small fry when he’s alone, but combined with Maricchi, he can be quite troublesome.”*

*Daiya Oomine frowned, displeased.*

*“...maybe. But is that something you would know before starting the game?”*

*“Ah, ‘O’ told me that.”*

*Hearing this, Daiya Oomine gets surprised for a second, but then flashes a wry smile.*

*“What’s with that smile?”*

*“No, don’t mind me. It just made a lot of sense to me.”*

*He says and turns his eyes towards the screen. Kazuki Hoshino talking with Noitan is being displayed on it. He's exactly the kind of clown that amuses me, being so serious while not knowing anything.*

*Daiya Oomine was watching this comical Kazuki Hoshino with intensity as if each single moment was precious.*

*Hah?! Didn't you want to laugh? What's with that serious visage?*

*"....."*

*Whatever, huh.*

*"Hey."*

*Daiya Oomine says without looking away from the screen.*

*"...what?"*

*"...let me confirm this: your NPC neither knows the details of the 'Game of Idleness' nor about himself being the 'owner', right?"*

*"If he knew, it would be unfair and boring, right?"*

*"Hmpf, your NPC behaves like this without knowing anything? I bet you think that this 'Game of Idleness' as well as the killing in [Kingdom Royale] have no meaning."*

*"Hah? Of course they have none. Do you think something else, Senpai?"*

*Daiya Oomine thinks briefly and answers,*

*"...leaving me aside, I bet Kazu thinks like this:"*

*"...?"*

*Daiya Oomine raises his head and gazes at me. Then he opens his mouth.*

*“«I’ll find a meaning in this ‘Game of Idleness’ then».”*

*For some reason Daiya Oomine seemed a little happy when he said that.*

*“.....”*

*---What an annoying visage.*

*To me his expression seems as if he had actually faith in Kazuki Hoshino, while letting him dance all the same.*

*Although such a feeling couldn’t possibly exist between enemies.*

*But what if those two were actually conspiring against me...? ...Aah, no, that’s impossible. I watched their conversation just now after all, and I also watched most of what happened in-game though the game machine. If they were conspiring, I would notice.*

*...well, and even if they are conspiring---*

*Well, I don’t care, after all.*

## Fourth Day <D> Big room

I am in the process of becoming the «king».

The flow greatly changed through the fall of Yuuri-san and Iroha-san. I was finally able to tell them about the ‘Game of Idleness’, thanks to Iroha-san’s strong presence.

Apart from what happened in the third round, I told them almost everything. Everything, including that everyone’s an NPC, that Daiya’s the ‘owner’ watching us from the outside and that he has promised to destroy the ‘box’ if everyone survives and no one kills anyone until the eighth day.

Koudai Kamiuchi seemed skeptical about it, but in a state where both Iroha-san and Yuuri-san follow me unconditionally, he was unable to object openly.

At any rate, I was able to make it clear.

«Everyone has to survive until the <E>-block of the eighth day.»

I was able to make our goal clear.

Iroha-san, who had lost her thorns, and Yuuri-san, who had no intention to act anymore, were listening to me. The remaining problems were only Koudai Kamiuchi’s whims and Daiya’s possible deceit.

I made everyone do a coming-out first in order to make those two lose their power.

The [classes] are distributed like this:

Iroha Shindou, [Revolutionary]

Yuuri Yanagi, [Sorcerer]

Koudai Kamiuchi, [The Double]

Maria, [Prince]

Daiya refused to reveal his [class], but since I am the [Knight], he has to be the [King], using the process of elimination.

The knives and the food that were kept by Iroha-san were passed on to me. That should have weakened Koudai Kamiuchi pretty much for the time being. He's [The Double] that has almost no ways of killing anybody as long the [King] doesn't move. Even if he wanted to do something, that would definitely require a lot of dedication and labor. Considering his personality, it's highly possible that he won't do anything anymore because changing the flow is plainly troublesome.

[Kingdom Royale] was almost not in operation anymore.

Of course I didn't lean back because of that.

When I went to the big room, Iroha-san, Yuuri-san and Koudai Kamiuchi were sitting on the ground, chatting.

"Hoshino-senpai, did you know? Yuuri-chan's still a virgin!"

"K-Kamiuchi-san... Please stop."

That's quite---no, very surprising.

"Really, Yuuri-san?"

Yuuri-san gets red, but doesn't answer.

"Oh, you came to harass Yuuri as well, Hoshino-kun? You sure have guts."

“Ah, s-sorry...”

I apologize upon being scolded by Iroha-san, but Yuuri-san averts her eyes anyway, seeming a little sulking.

...well, considering that she neglected her social contacts for learning, it's only natural that she wouldn't have much experience in that field.

So she managed to act like *that* in-game until now without much experience...? It's no surprise Iroha-san would be jealous of that ability to fascinate others, then...

But that raises another question.

“...have you ever confessed to someone, Yuuri-san?”

“W-Why do you ask that?! Your apology wasn't sincere at all, was it?!”

“S-Sorry, but you got me curious...”

“.....no, I guess...”

I can't help but smile to myself. So I am the only one she ever confessed to. I feel just a little honored.

“Eh? Wait a sec, Yuuri. How did you go out with him, then?”

“If I just smile a bit and connect hands, it's a breeze to make any man fall for me~”

“H-Hey, Kamiuchi-san! I d-don't think like that, really!”

“You can't lie to me, Yuuri-chan! That's exactly what you think, isn't it? Well, but leaving that aside, how did you make him confess to you?”

“W-Well.....”

“I bet you used a similar method to leave him no other choice, right? Whew, you little devil! Witch!”

“Uuh...”

Next to Yuuri-san who’s being teased by Kamiuchi-kun, Iroha-san frowns and looks a little ill-tempered as well.

“Why’s everyone just out for Yuuri? I’m quite pretty, too!”

“Ah, that was just pretty cute from you, Kaichou!”

“Eh? What was? I merely acted jealous, didn’t I?”

“You exposing your honest emotions was! How should I put it... self-reliant girls aren’t cute. I mean, doesn’t one feel unnecessary at the side of someone who solves all problems on her own?”

“...Huuh, this is quite an interesting opinion. Which means that it’s Yuuri’s self-deprecating personality that leads to that «I want to protect her»-feeling, right? Yuuri, you really are a sly one.”

“Uuh... Iroha, that’s mean~!”

Yuuri-san goes into a huff, whereupon Iroha-san can’t resist the urge to hug her.

“Aren’t you cuuute...”

Yuuri-san seems surprised at first, but then she just laughs happily and lets Iroha-san hug her.

I have the feeling that Iroha-san has softened a bit when I look at her current mood. Perhaps this side of her was released by the child-like wailing the other day.

But I’m sure that’s favorable.

“.....Iroha-san.”

“What, Hoshino-kun?”

“Don’t worry, you’re going to be popular as well!”

Iroha-san smiles at my words.

Then, she responds, keeping this gentle smile,

“Thank you very much for that degrading advice. You masterfully managed to piss me off.”

Well, maybe she won’t get soft after all.

“If you stay that way, you’re going to be an eternal virgin, Kaichou!☆”

“Shut up.”

“In any case, that missing finger’s just too scary. You totally look like a high school girl that had to do penance for her failures in the underground society!” [1]

“Ahaha, Kamiuchi, drop dead.”

---Koudai Kamiuchi is dangerous.

In fact, the two of them are aware of that.

I didn’t go into detail, but I told them that he has personally killed in the past rounds using a knife and also that he seemed to even enjoy it.

But they have still been happily chatting with him, just like now.

That’s because I requested them to do that.

Koudai Kamiuchi would naturally not be pleased if they opposed him and were distinctly wary of him.

And if that happened, he would start [Kingdom Royale] by striking back and upsetting the status quo. But if we kept him entertained, he may not do anything.

No... it's not like I relaxed with such an unsure plan. I've been cautious all this time. I've been observing him all this time because I feared that a trivial trigger would be enough to make him explode.

It's just that---

"No, you drop dead."

---Koudai Kamiuchi's actions exceeded all my forecasts by far.

Splash.

Along with that sound, another tragedy occurs.

The arms that have been embracing Yuuri-san drop down whereupon Iroha-san's body starts to slowly slide down. Yuuri-san seems confused about what's just happened and stares perplexedly at the head that's buried in her chest.

Yuuri-san looks at her own hands.

They're stained with red liquid.

"-----"

She's unable to even scream at this gruesome scene.

Koudai Kamiuchi pulls out the knife from Iroha-san's back, grabs her head by the hair and throws her away from Yuuri-san. He then straddles her upturned body and starts stabbing her with his knife. Over and over again.

\*stab\*, \*stab\*, \*stab\*, \*stab\*, \*stab\*, after stabbing her body for a while at regular intervals, Koudai Kamiuchi stands up and sneers,

“So you were an eternal virgin after all. Too bad.”

Why...?

In order to keep the last fragments of my clear mind that have been vanishing bit by bit with each stabbing sound, I hug my own shoulders and start pondering.

The knives in my room are properly stowed away. My, Iroha-san's, Yuuri-san's and Koudai Kamiuchi's knife are there for certain.

So why does he still have a knife?

.....could that be...?

I think about it.

Why did Koudai Kamiuchi exceed my expectations? Why wasn't I able to handle him even though I knew about his unstable personality?

I'm positive that I have done what's necessary. So there must be something I have overlooked.

And that is---

“.....Daiya.”

I whispered his name, but he didn't look at me.

He was just touching the piercing in his right ear.

I can't comprehend him.

Why did he need to do that?

I take out the portable terminal and start to research something that's been bothering me.

Aah... as I thought. Daiya has had a total of three [Secret Meetings] with Koudai Kamiuchi. On the first day, on the second, and today as well.

I bet Daiya's been wary of me since the very beginning. And after seeing my actions yesterday, he promptly initiated a counter-plan.

"Whew, I was really surprised."

I look at Koudai Kamiuchi.

"I didn't think it would really be as Oomine-senpai said. Hoshino-senpai conspired with Kaichou and Yuuri-chan. You made them lose the will to take part in the game by telling them that they just have to survive for eight days. For that purpose they behaved friendly to me. Heh, if Oomine-senpai's right so far, then it should be safe to assume that the rest's also true."

".....what did he say...?"

"He said that you, the conspirators, will kill the rest of us."

How dare he tell him such bullshit...!

"You would win after all, considering the rules. Geez, Hoshino-senpai, you sure are shrewd in spite of your harmless appearance. I have no clue why you knew your own [class], but you've been planning that from the very beginning, right? You noticed that the three [classes] that are capable of killing can coexist, conspired, made up a random another way of surviving and tried to make us lose our will to participate in the killer-game. You almost got me there!"

Why does he... interpret it like that?

But I guess that's [Kingdom Royale]. A game that makes you distrust everyone, makes you deceive each other, and eventually makes you kill each other.

I drop my gaze. Yuuri-san has put Iroha-san's head on her lap and is pushing her insides back into her body while murmuring her name.

Koudai Kamiuchi laughs as if he was watching a comedic play when he sees her like that.

"I would just need to kill Hoshino-senpai and Maricchi now, but... I'll enjoy this some more. Looks like you can't resist me anyway. Ahaha, this thrill that you can't get in the real world is the true charm of [Kingdom Royale], isn't it!"

So in the end, I couldn't prevent Koudai Kamiuchi from committing murder again.

I lost.

No... I was made to lose.

«Absolutely impossible!»

I was made to lose by Daiya Oomine.

«It sure is easy to understand one's own thoughts. Thanks to that, I just got what the 'real me' is thinking.»

"-----Ah."

I see.

Of course Daiya would do that.

I've told him everything. I've told the «NPC Daiya Oomine» what the «real Daiya Oomine» has done. And the «NPC Daiya Oomine» understood the intention of the «real Daiya Oomine».

If he understood it, he would naturally take the actions the «original» wishes for.

And that «real Daiya» is my enemy.

Therefore, it's only natural that the Daiya here would oppose me with his actions and try to prevent me from achieving my goal of «making everyone survive».

And in fact, he succeeded at preventing my victory.

...Heh.

I lost the moment I tried to make him my ally.

“...hrhr”

Daiya's muffled laugh.

“You couldn't possibly become the «king» in the first place! As if you were geared for that!”

These words make me realize.

Previously I ridiculed Iroha-san as a child that wants to become the «king». Just how dumb have I been? That child was no one else but... me.

“.....Haha.”

From the very start, there's been only one person that could become the «king».

Daiya Oomine.

Like that, I was easily thrown off the throne.

- [Iroha Shindou], stabbed 17 times over different locations on her body by [Koudai Kamiuchi], dead.

## **Fifth Day <B> Big room**

Yuuri-san died.

She was executed because she didn't come to the big room in time.

I feared this already because yesterday she didn't return to her room on her own after becoming traumatized. So in the end, she really did it.

Yuuri-san committed passive suicide and is no more.

“Uwaa... that's awful! My valuable prize disappeared before I could obtain it! Uuh, Yuuri-chan's virginity!”

I feel dark emotions well up inside me at seeing Koudai Kamiuchi, who is, in spite of what he said, really just grinning while supporting his head with his hand.

However, I don't care about how horrible he is anymore.

I have no goal anymore, after all.

What remains are feelings of guilt towards Iroha-san and Yuuri-san. Only the feelings towards those two who had to die just because I thought I could become the «king».

Should I have done the same as Yuuri-san...?

I'm so lost that I even have such thoughts. Right now, I have no idea what to do with the remaining few days of my life.

Therefore, the only thing I'm doing is apologizing to them in my mind.

I'm sorry.

I'm really sorry.

Of course they were just NPCs, so I can meet them again if I manage to survive. But that fact doesn't make these feelings of guilt disappear. Aah... I finally understood how they felt when they were forced to kill the NPCs when they were players.

Indeed, the fact that the others are just NPCs doesn't make it any better.

I can't lift my face off the table.

There was one jute bag on it. In the bag was a disabled portable terminal and the two watches Irohasan had been wearing - orange and beige.

Daiya puts on these watches.

After seeing that, I also throw my blue watch to him. Daiya glances at me, but then he wordlessly puts on my watch as well.

"Rather than the watch, I hope you also brought the other things I asked you to?"

I nod, take the food portions out of the jute bag I brought along and lay them out on the table. I didn't do that because I gave up, but because I gathered that he would kill me otherwise.

Since I still have all of my own portions, I won't die instantly. But I lost my [Revolutionary]-like power with this.

[Kingdom Royale] has regained its original gruesomeness. In order to survive there's no way left anymore but to meet one's victory conditions. Daiya and Koudai Kamiuchi will naturally come to kill me soon.

So, should I try to win myself?

.....Impossible. I'm the [Knight] while Maria's the [Prince]. We can't survive together. Trying to win would automatically mean wishing for Maria's death. No matter how much she's an NPC, I would definitely never wish for her to die.

I can't win against them with this kind of feeling.

So, I'm going to die.

“.....”

...I'm going to die?

Well, yeah. I guess so.

But then---why?

I raise my head.

I look at Maria.

All four of us should know that I'm going to be next.

Maria should know, too. And yet she's not doing anything to prevent it.

She? She, who can easily throw her own life away for others? And not just since today. All the time since yesterday, she almost hasn't spoken at all.

That can't be.

“Maria?”

I call her name. Although she can clearly hear me, she doesn't look at me.

Maria was just biting secretly on her lip.

- [Yuuri Yanagi], executed because she didn't return to the big room until 12:10. Death by beheading.

## **Fifth Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Maria Otonashi], [Maria Otonashi]'s room**

<del>[Iroha Shindou]</del>	dead
<del>[Yuuri Yanagi]</del>	dead
[Daiya Oomine]	-> [Kazuki Hoshino] 16:10~16:40
[Kazuki Hoshino]	-> [Maria Otonashi] 15:00~16:00
[Koudai Kamiuchi]	-> [Daiya Oomine] 15:00~15:30
[Maria Otonashi]	-> [Kazuki Hoshino] 15:00~16:00

Why doesn't Maria do anything?

There is only one answer to this question:

Like me, she's at a loss what to do.

But how did she arrive at this condition? Did she also get shocked by something, like I did by Yuuri-san's and Iroha-san's death?

Maria doesn't greet me when I arrive at her room, seeming a bit uncomfortable.

"Maria?"

"....."

...Something's definitely wrong.

"...Can I sit down next to you?"

Usually I wouldn't even need to ask. We don't need to ask each other's approval first.

But Maria frowns at hearing this question now.

"No. Don't sit there."

And leaves me dumbfounded.

"...why?"

Maria closes her mouth and averts her eyes to avoid my question.

But I mustn't ignore that.

"...tell me."

Even so, Maria still hesitates to open her mouth. But when I stare at her for a while without saying a word, she finally, reluctantly opens her mouth.

"I've been watching your actions all the while."

Maria continues, still not meeting my gaze.

"I've been watching your movements in this game, waiting for you to rely on me. You managed to drive Shindou into a corner all alone, you built a foundation to explain the 'boxes' to them by yourself and you even were on the verge of succeeding once. Kamiuchi may have ruined it in the end, but I think your actions themselves were splendid. And after watching you, I've arrived at a conclusion."

Maria says,

"You are not Kazuki Hoshino."

That's the reason for her indecisive attitude...?

«You are... Kazuki, right?»

Indeed, she's said that already in our [Secret Meeting] on the second day.

But I didn't take it too seriously at that time. I mean, she was able to recognize me even during the 'Sevennight in Mud'.

So this has to be a joke.

“...Geez, what are you talking about, Maria?”

She does, however, not say “just joking” as always. She won’t relieve me like that.

“Kazuki.”

Instead, she says that.

“[Class]-wise we’re enemies, right?”

“...what are you saying? But well, yeah, our [classes] are opposing each other... eh?”

Did Maria want to hint at following?

“Do you think I’d kill you...?”

For some reason Maria doesn’t shake her head at this question that’s just like a joke to me.

“S-Stop that... I would never---”

“Kazuki.”

She interrupts me.

“I was confident in being able to predict your actions. We’ve spent a whole lifetime together, after all. But your actions in [Kingdom Royale] have all been contrary to my expectations. So, I just don’t know anymore. I’m also not sure if you will move as I expect from now on.”

“.....”

“I’m positive that the victory conditions you mentioned were true. But, we failed. So, what will you do now?”

“I’m... still...”

“I’m an NPC, right? Even if you killed me, the real Maria Otonashi wouldn’t die, would she?”

“What are you getting at...? Do you think... I would kill you because of that?”

“That’s not what I think. I can’t imagine you killing me.”

“Then...”

“But as I said; that’s just another of my inaccurate predictions. I don’t understand your thoughts anymore, since you let go of my hand.”

“No way...”

When I’m about to press her, wanting to solve this misunderstanding,

“Don’t come near!”

Maria rejects me by showing me the palm of her hand.

But what makes me stop, more than her words or her attitude, is the disturbance on her face.

“You look exactly like Kazuki Hoshino, and that makes you --- scary.”

I haven’t relied on Maria in this game.

Because I knew that relying on Maria, who can be called the weakest in here, leads to defeat. Because I knew that I couldn’t win if I didn’t suppress the desire to rely on her, and if I didn’t stop being so soft.

I was able to pull that off because of my experiences in the previous rounds.

It’s something I wouldn’t have been able to do without the information I gathered. So, indeed, my actions must look unnatural from Maria’s point of view.

But I was sure she would understand nonetheless.

I mean, it's Maria! She, who comprehends me more than anyone else. I thought she would accept everything I'd do and never mistake me.

It was my emotional support.

Being confident that we trust each other was my emotional support.

Even so---

".....Why?"

Before my eyes is Maria's disturbed face.

This is what my actions have led to.

---I see.

I just got the reason Maria doesn't do anything.

I've already lost her trust long ago.

There's no need for Maria to save someone she doesn't know.

Thus, Maria won't save me anymore.

.....

.....

.....really?

It's Maria.

Sitting in front of me is Maria, who would sacrifice herself for absolutely anyone in order to save that person.

And yet she's abandoned me...?

Just because she doubts whether I'm really Kazuki Hoshino?

"Are you okay with this?"

I ask her.

"...I'm going to die, you know?"

The fear and disturbance in Maria's expression seem to be real.

But what disturbs her so much? What frightens her so much? She wouldn't behave like that even when she thought of me as her enemy. If she considered me an enemy, she would definitely be a lot more determined.

So, what is she thinking, then?

".....as you are right now, you can survive on your own, can't you?"

Maria replies with downcast eyes.

"No way! I can neither kill you, nor accept it if someone else killed you! So there's no way I could win against Da---"

Wait.

I can definitely not kill Maria. As long as Maria's here, I can't possibly win in [Kingdom Royale]. That is a certain fact.

But if you turn that around, it becomes:

I can survive if Maria disappears.

".....Maria."

When she raises her head, I say,

"Do you intend to commit suicide?"

Upon hearing that, Maria silently fixes her gaze on me.

"Do you plan to die on your own, like Yuuri-san did? To raise my survival chances at least a bit?"

She stays silent and I continue,

“Because you think I may be able to kill Daiya’s NPC as I am now...?”

Maria’s expression finally softens.

“I thought about that, indeed. After all, I am just an NPC whose life doesn’t matter. However, I merely considered that method.”

“Cut that out...! I don’t want to win in this game at all!”

“But that’s because I’m here, isn’t it? If it weren’t for me, you would tend more towards surviving.”

“That’s---”

Seeing me waver, Maria lets out a small sigh.

“...you know, Kazuki. It seems I can’t talk myself out of it anymore, so let me tell you this: I consider your change undesirable. That is because it makes me unable to predict your actions.”

“...What’s the point in being able to do that?”

“If I could predict them, I could, for example, surmise what actions you would take after my death and judge whether you could survive or not. But because I’m not able to do that now, my hands are tied.”

“....what are you talking about?”

‘After my death?’ What kind of assumption is that!

But Maria continues without caring about my reaction.

“You haven’t depended on me this time. Indeed, I may be helpless and serve no purpose in [Kingdom Royale]. Sure. But I don’t care.”

Maria says with a smile of all things,

“I will protect you all the same!”

And for that sake you don’t mind using your own life...?

Even though you perfectly know that I don’t desire that?

«Still, I want to protect you even if I have to pay with my own life»

Didn’t I tell her?

Didn’t I tell her in the second round that,

«It’s my job to protect you when you have lost your ‘box’.»

Therefore---

“---I won’t let you.”

I definitely won’t allow Maria to die for my sake.

“Didn’t I tell you, that’s my task?! I won’t let you!”

Maria widens her eyes.

Aah, right. Maria doesn’t remember what I told her in the second round. It’s only natural that she’s dumbfounded.

That doesn’t matter. As long I can convey my intention!

“You don’t protect me. I will protect---”

“Wait.”

But she stops me.

She has already narrowed her eyes and is piercing me with a sharp glance,

“What has come over you?”

“...What do you mean?”

“What you want to protect is your everyday life, not me, right? It’s the everyday life Mogi, Kirino and the others are in, right? Didn’t you have an unshakable determination for that? So what’s with this whining? Don’t disappoint me too much!”

I’m left astonished.

Because she obviously is serious about that.

“.....I see.”

I finally noticed.

Maria has been overestimating me.

She has come to see me insisting on my everyday life for a whole lifetime without changing this belief. That may have looked amazing to her. Although the only reason I couldn’t change was being inside that unchanging recurrence, I must have looked like some superhuman to her.

Maria thought that I would never change because I didn’t change for such a long time.

But that’s not possible.

I’m ordinary. That’s what I always say. Even ‘O’ said that I’m going to change soon.

Also, I’m sure superhumans don’t exist. Even people like Iroha Shindou, Yuuri Yanagi, Koudai Kamiuchi or Daiya Oomine didn’t always manage to survive [Kingdom Royale]. I don’t know which one of them is the best. And I think that’s the evidence that there are no superhumans. Ironically, I realized that in this ‘box’ that was only created for staving off boredom.

Thus, I’m no superhuman.

And---neither is Maria.

And yet she's getting something wrong.

"...why aren't you in this everyday life as well?"

"Isn't that... obvious?"

Because she's trying to be special. Because she thinks she can.

"Because I am a 'box'."

Even though she's just a normal person.

Then, I think without any logical connection or basis:

It's not over yet.

I haven't lost yet.

Maria is still alive, after all.

### **Fifth Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Daiya Oomine], [Kazuki Hoshino]'s room**

«Do you want to kill [Koudai Kamiuchi] by using [Deathblow]?»

This message was displayed on the monitor in my room.

Those messages are set to disappear during [Secret Meetings] so they aren't seen by the other players. Therefore, the message isn't there anymore, now that Daiya has come.

But in this case, that function's pointless.

After all, it must have been Daiya, the [King], who selected the target for [Murder].

"...what are you scheming? Weren't you supporting Koudai Kamiuchi?"

Daiya answers with a daring smile while sitting on the table with crossed legs,

“Whoa, that’s a great joke. As if I would lend a hand to such a guy! I merely used him because he was a useful tool.”

“...But in regards to your [classes], [King] and [The Double], you can coexist.”

“Do you even think winning in [Kingdom Royale] is my goal or what?”

“-----”

I’m bereft of speech for a moment. I didn’t expect him to declare that he doesn’t intend to win this game so distinctly.

What on earth is he up to...?

“...So, why did you kill Yuuri-san and Iroha-san? Did you really need to do that?”

“...in a way, yes. But in any case, Yanagi committed suicide! I didn’t expect that at all!”

“.....did you plan to leave Yuuri-san alive?”

Daiya flashes a sarcastic grin.

“No. But I planned to make use of her for a while by showing you how she suffers, being violated by Kamiuchi before your very eyes. In order to fan your anxiety.”

I don’t get it.

I have no idea what’s going on in his head.

However, what he’s doing is terrible, no matter what reason he may have.

“What anxiety are you talking about, anyway...?!”

“After Yanagi, Otonashi is obviously the next target in both life and sexual desire for Kamiuchi, isn’t she? I wanted to make you aware of what Otonashi will have to go through if you don’t do anything.”

“Why?!”

Accidentally I shout.

But I know that, leaving aside the means, Daiya wouldn’t do such a cruel thing without meaning. I won’t mistake this fact and I also believe I’m right about that.

“.....”

Right, Daiya doesn’t do anything without meaning.

Therefore, there must have been a meaning in bringing this situation about. There also must have been a meaning in selecting Koudai Kamiuchi as the target for [Murder] and in initiating this [Secret Meeting] with me.

I just have absolutely no idea about his reasons.

I mean, what is this ‘box’? A ‘box’ just to stave off boredom? What’s that? That’s not like Daiya at all.

«A ‘box’ just for the purpose of making others play a killer-game? Heh... just how nonsensical is this? There’s no meaning to its existence.»

In fact, he said so in the second round. I don’t think his NPC tried to deceive me then, knowing nothing about the ‘Game of Idleness’.

«The ‘box’ can be no more than a way to kill time for people that were engulfed by boredom. Thus, this is only a game. A pointless game.»

He's contradicting himself. His statements don't match. Although Daiya would never, ever, put such a wish into his 'box', the 'Game of Idleness' is, without doubt, nothing but a way to stave off boredom. This is obviously contradicting---

"-----"

No.

It's not contradicting.

«Otonashi can sense and intervene in 'boxes' and knows 'O' because she's an 'owner', right? As I'm already an 'owner' myself, it wouldn't be strange if I had the same abilities.»

Right.

That was it.

Daiya Oomine has been taking advantage of someone else's 'box'.

So, who is the 'owner' of the 'Game of Idleness'?

Only one person comes to mind. I know only one person that fits the pattern of 'someone that was engulfed by boredom' just too perfectly.

"Koudai Kamiuchi."

I raise my head and tell Daiya,

"Koudai Kamiuchi is the 'owner' of the 'Game of Idleness'."

Right, it's not Daiya.

Aah, he was even giving me hints the whole time. He didn't call himself the 'owner' of the 'Game of Idleness' even once, and his NPC seriously denied being its

‘owner’ as well. Daiya has not told a single lie, except when he concealed being the [Revolutionary] in the first round.

There were more than enough hints to notice. He was surprisingly fair and made sure I was able to fight against him.

And yet, I merely felt something was slightly wrong, but I couldn’t figure out that Daiya wasn’t the ‘owner’.

He raises one of his cheeks to a daring grin and says, “I guess I didn’t need to give you some hints. You noticed pretty fast.”

“Fast? ...it’s too late already!”

I already sacrificed Iroha-san and Yuuri-san. You can’t possibly call it fast.

Thanks to my slowness, I was controlled by Daiya like a puppet and failed miserably.

But...

But can’t you think of this as a new hope?

I lost to Daiya. But I only lost to Daiya, not to the ‘owner’ of the ‘Game of Idleness’.

Right --- I haven’t lost to the ‘Game of Idleness’ yet.

Therefore, there might still be a possibility to slip out of the ‘Game of Idleness’.

“Tell me, Kazu, do you know why you couldn’t win against me?”

Daiya says that.

“It’s because your goal is ambiguous.”

“...Eh? But my goal is clear? It’s to return to my everyday life... or it should be...”

I need to slip out without killing anyone. Because I would be unable to return to my everyday life as soon as I kill someone - even if it is just an NPC.

That's why I tried to clear the «everyone has to survive for eight days»-condition Daiya told me of, and intended to become the «king».

“Kazu, did you seriously think you were geared for becoming the «king»!”

The same phrase as yesterday.

“...what do you mean?”

“Just like I said. Only someone that's prepared to devote themselves to others' happiness, without caring about their own, is allowed to become a «king».”

...I wonder?

If only such people may become the «king», then I'm indeed not geared for it. I don't want to become like that.

There's only --- Maria who would want to become like that.

“Since that's not happiness for you, you can neither become it nor do you need to. At the most, you can become,”

Daiya says, wearing a wry smile,

“A «knight» who solely protects a certain somebody, right?”

«Knight».

This word calls a picture forth in me.

A picture of myself on my knees, stretching out my hand to the princess.

I know that scene.

The background's blurred. I don't know whether it was a castle, a terrace, a corridor or a classroom. I suppose the background has been painted over by my everyday life.

But I can vividly recognize who the princess is.

If I don't take her with me, this princess would surely become the next «king». And then she won't be able to think about her own happiness a second time. Even though she would really want to escape, taken by the hand by me.

That's why I had decided to betray everything and make everyone my enemy, protecting her.

For her sake.

...Aah, right.

Until I met her, I insisted on my everyday life because of a distortion. It was just an emotional measure to forget about the incident with «Nana Yanagi».

But that started to change when I met her.

I wanted to have her by my side. I wanted her to be a part of my life, to exist in my everyday life.

Having her by my side was what I called my «everyday life».

So that's it.

Before I knew it, my goal----

My goal has become saving Maria.

That's why Daiya told me it's «absolutely impossible» for me to win.

He recognized that I wasn't comprehending my own goal. He was sure not to lose against me as long as I was like that.

Damn... he's perfectly right!

“If your goal is clear now, do what must be done.”

“...what must be done?”

Daiya says plainly,

“Yeah, what you have to do. To kill Koudai Kamiuchi.”

“.....Kill.....?”

The Koudai Kamiuchi that's here is just an NPC, so the ‘Game of Idleness’ won't be stopped by killing him.

“But... ah, I see.”

If I don't do that, the Maria in here is going to be killed. Not only that, she would even be made his toy.

Being her «knight», I can't allow that.

Therefore, I have to kill the ‘owner’, Koudai Kamiuchi.

“.....But still.”

Can I really pull it off?

Sure, Koudai Kamiuchi is someone who's beyond all hope. If I wasn't concerned directly, even I wouldn't care too much if his NPC was killed.

But when you have to do it yourself, everything's different. I'm sure I won't be able to return once I choose to «kill» him. I would have to falsify myself when socializing with Kokone, Haruaki or Mogi-san.

But Daiya's telling me to do it anyway.

Daiya's telling me to do it if I know what's really dear to me.

But will it really be my «everyday life» I return to after killing him and slipping out of the «Game of Idleness»?

“Kazu, try touching the monitor for a few seconds.”

I touch the monitor as he told me. Nothing happens right away, but after waiting about five seconds, the monitor turns on and the message «Do you want to reveal the screen?» appears.

“If you accept, the screen where you can use [Deathblow] will appear. You can decide right now to kill Koudai Kamiuchi.”

“.....I see.”

I press the «Yes» button, whereupon the message «Do you want to kill [Koudai Kamiuchi] by using [Deathblow]?» appears.

I can kill someone just by pressing this button.

I haven't done so in any of the games up to now, but I guess I can't avoid it anymore.

So if I can protect Maria with that, I.....

I reach out for the button and---

“.....”

---stop my hand.

Wait.

Am I really okay with this? Is it okay to move as Daiya says?

Am I seriously thinking that I can protect Maria if I follow Daiya?

“...What's wrong? Did you get cold feet?”

“Daiya.”

He looks at me suspiciously when I call him with a frown.

“You’re Daiya’s NPC, right?”

“...why do you need to state the obvious?”

“So it’s not like you know the intentions of the «real Daiya» completely, right?”

The suspicion in his look becomes even stronger.

“Answer me.”

I say, focusing on Daiya.

“What happens to our promise?”

Daiya grasps what I’m driving at and keeps silent.

“I wasn’t able to «make everyone survive until the eighth day». Hence, the Daiya on the other side doesn’t need to destroy the ‘Game of Idleness’.”

“.....”

“If the «Game of Idleness» doesn’t get destroyed, I can’t protect Maria. Even worse, being unable to kill Maria, who’s the «Prince» in this game, I’m going to die for sure. And Maria will definitely not be able to win her round when she’s the player. In other words, I can’t protect Maria.”

Daiya remains silent. Therefore, I continue,

“You actually don’t know how the «real Daiya» intends to solve this incident, do you?”

“.....”

Daiya doesn’t answer.

That’s basically telling me that he really doesn’t know it.

“...I can’t just follow you, then. I have to find a way to save Maria myself.”

“.....that Koudai Kamiuchi has to be killed is certain.”

“Yeah, I also think I have to kill him because Maria would be killed otherwise, but...”

...Oh?

No, wait. What did he just say?

Because of his uncomfortable expression, I assumed he was just trying to evade my previous question. But is it really like this?

What if his statement was the answer to my question about how the «real Daiya» is trying to solve this incident?

«That Koudai Kamiuchi has to be killed is certain.»

This sentence.

I know. I know the easiest way to destroy a ‘box’.

So, didn’t he actually want to say the following?

He’ll crush the ‘Game of Idleness’ along with its ‘owner’.

The «real Daiya» will settle this by killing the «real Koudai Kamiuchi».

But why did he hesitate to say that, then?

Because it’s an awful solution? ...No, Daiya can say such things easily.

Daiya is scowling at me. He’s forbidding me to put my understanding into words with his glance.

What's with this reaction? Why is he on guard, even though nobody can listen to what we talk about in this [Secret Meeting]?

Sure, there is a possibility that Koudai Kamiuchi will hear this conversation on our portable terminal later. But if that was it, he wouldn't have told me to «kill Koudai Kamiuchi».

Which means that there's someone else who can hear this conversation? Someone which should better not hear it?

Besides us, there is---

“.....”

I look to the ceiling without thinking.

There's just the blank concrete ceiling that doesn't change no matter how long I stare at it.

The «real Daiya» seemed to know about what I've done so far. I can't say for sure, but I guess he's watching my fight through that game machine even now.

Right, in short --- the [real Daiya] and the [real Koudai Kamiuchi] can hear this conversation.

The «real Koudai Kamiuchi» mustn't get wind of the «real Daiya's» intentions of killing him. The odds would be against Daiya in a direct fight...all the more when there are no knives and such in that dark room.

But how does he plan to kill Koudai Kamiuchi then?

I reconsider everything Daiya has said. “‘Natures’ are like this. Every event changes its shape according to your nature.” “Doesn't matter. I have now tasted the

«hope» called ‘box’. As I have tasted it, there’s no way I’d let someone steal it from me.” “You should know that I didn’t do anything for a while after obtaining a ‘box’. In other words, I was merely in possession of the ‘box’ without using it.” “You can survive if nobody kills anyone during those eight days.” “Have I ever lied to you?” “Therefore I am --- your enemy.”

“.....”

I see.

So that’s how it was.

“Daiya.”

He looks at me with a frown.

“You asked him about that week, didn’t you?”

Daiya doesn’t answer.

That makes it certain.

“.....hehe...”

I’ve fully understood Daiya’s intentions.

“Daiya, you are such a liar.”

Therefore I can’t help it but swear at him like this.

“You haven’t won against me at all.”

I mean, his plan would miscarry just by exposing his scheme right now.

You can’t call that having won already.

“...Don’t get carried away, Kazu! What can you do, being unable to kill Otonashi?”

Indeed.

I may have figured out that Koudai Kamiuchi's the 'owner', but in order to confront him I would need to win this round of [Kingdom Royale] first - even though I can't win because I can't kill Maria.

But that's no issue in the plan Daiya's scheming. Because he's going to destroy the 'Game of Idleness' even before that.

But---

"So I'm supposed to rely on you?"

Quite odd, isn't it?

"Even though you're my enemy? And even though we have no idea whether your plan will succeed? I'll try to think of a better strategy then!"

"....."

Daiya closes his mouth.

Daiya's plan is advantageous for both of us. In truth, I am aware of that and I'm sure Daiya knows that I am as well.

I would immediately follow him if he just bowed lightly and said please.

But Daiya won't do that.

He would never bow before me.

Daiya would never lower his stance in front of me. That's not just because he wants to protect his pride. I still don't know Daiya's goal, but I'm sure he mustn't bow before me for its sake.

Just like Maria who doesn't ever bend.

Therefore, Daiya just keeps scowling at me with enmity in his eyes, not lowering his head.

With a cutting intensity.

“.....Daiya.”

I'll be the one that bends, then!

If I don't, Daiya may be killed. And I don't want that, after all, since he has always been my friend.

“I have a request.”

It's no request, really. It's something Daiya is forced to do. He would need to do it anyway.

“I want you to talk Koudai Kamiuchi around to not do Maria any harm.”

I mean, I won't hold back anymore if Maria dies because of one of Koudai Kamiuchi's whims.

If that happens, I will kill Daiya.

And he can't win against me. Because his plan doesn't allow him to kill me.

“.....”

Daiya kept silent with a frown, but that was definitely a sign of acceptance.

### **Sixth Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Maria Otonashi], [Kazuki Hoshino]'s room**

<del>[Iroha Shindou]</del>	dead
<del>[Yuuri Yanagi]</del>	dead
[Daiya Oomine]	-> [Maria Otonashi] 16:20~16:50
[Kazuki Hoshino]	-> [Maria Otonashi] 15:00~16:00
[Koudai Kamiuchi]	-> [Kazuki Hoshino] 16:20~16:50
[Maria Otonashi]	-> [Kazuki Hoshino] 15:00~16:00

It seems like Daiya succeeded at talking him around. In the end, Koudai Kamiuchi didn't do anything for the day.

But it was obvious to the eye that he could barely manage to behave himself today. He is unable to conceal the thirst for violence inside him any longer, and dyes his surroundings in it.

I know that pitch black atmosphere that almost seems to consist of boiled down desire from a certain Master Room.

There's still something Daiya is overlooking.

That is, how Maria is going to move.

Daiya's plan will only be executed if the time passes. The «real Daiya» won't move until shortly before we turn into mummies because our food portions run out. I know that.

But Maria doesn't know of his plan, of course. She still thinks I'm going to die if the time limit draws near.

Of course, she will try to make me win in [Kingdom Royale] so that I can survive...while knowing that my victory conditions can't be met as long as she's alive.

In other words---

Maria is going to die for my victory conditions if I don't do something.

In order to prevent that, I have to persuade her. But I know very well that Maria doesn't bend that easily.

That's why I asked Daiya to pacify Koudai Kamiuchi.

I couldn't kill him right then. Because, for persuading her, I wanted Maria to see.

---See how I kill Koudai Kamiuchi.

I confront Maria who has arrived at my room.

I wonder why?

Now that I have figured out my goal, I feel like something's terribly out of place when looking at Maria.

Maria's silhouette looks blurred as if my eyes have lost their focus.

"Kazuki."

She doesn't sit down next to me after all.

I guess she still doesn't admit that I'm «Kazuki Hoshino». She won't approve of me as things stand now, although I figured out my goal.

"It seems like I need to die, after all."

Therefore, I can't stop her foolishness if things stay like this.

"Otherwise I'm going to stand in your way for sure, Kazuki. You wouldn't be able to win in [Kingdom Royale], either. But hey, fortunately I'm just an NPC. There's nothing to worry about."

She says, carelessly.

I can't help but sigh.

As I thought, it will be most difficult to stop Maria.

"Maria, you don't have to worry about that anymore."

"Why?"

"Because I'll kill Koudai Kamiuchi!"

"-----"

Maria's bereft of speech for an instant, but she recovers from her astonishment right away.

"I really don't understand you anymore."

Maria frowns.

"So you conspired with Oomine, huh. And you readily made the worst possible choice on top of that."

"I've already decided."

"...I see," Maria looks away, "I don't even consider murder as a method. Using such a means to solve something is, however effective it may be, nothing but an atrocity. I once said something similar in the 'Rejecting Classroom'... but, well, you don't remember, huh."

It would be a lie to say that I didn't feel anything, confronted with Maria's attitude of refusal. But I don't step back, even while being hurt by her words.

"It's much more awry to commit suicide."

"If it's about humans, yes. But I am a 'box'."

"Don't make such an excuse! You definitely know that I don't wish for that!"

Maria widens her eyes when she hears my scream.

".....are you still talking about this nonsense? Why have you become so soft? You should have what it takes! You should be able to prioritize your «everyday life» over me!"

Aren't you the one still talking nonsense?

I should be the one to say that!

I take a step forward and touch the monitor while being watched suspiciously by Maria. A message appears on the monitor.

«Do you want to kill [Koudai Kamiuchi] by using [Deathblow]?»

I'll show her, then.

I'll show Maria that I have changed. That's the one and only reason I postponed killing him for a day.

And then I'll have her trust the changed me.

I'll have her understand that she doesn't need to die.

For that purpose, I reach out for the letters «KILL?» that cover Koudai Kamiuchi's eyes.

“S-Stop!!”

Maria rushes to me with wide-open eyes and grabs my arm.

“.....Why?”

Honestly, I didn't expect her to panic so hard.

“...What do you mean?”

Maria asks back, her eyes slightly averted.

“Why do you dislike the thought of me changing so much? Sure enough, it's not good at all to do this. But is it really something you need to stop on any account? Both of us may be saved by doing that, you know?”

I recall our [Secret Meeting] yesterday.

«You look exactly like Kazuki Hoshino, and that makes you --- scary.»

“Why do you fear my change so much?”

“.....”

Maria can't answer this question.

“Just in case: it's no use if you stop me from pressing the button! Even if you hold me back right now, I will just press the button when you're gone.”

“...I know.”

But contrary to her words, she puts in more strength.

“I've become emotional, that's why I'm stopping you. Yeah, I admit it. I absolutely don't want you to change.”

“...But it's too late.”

Maria gazes at me as I murmur this.

“...It seems so.”

And lets go of my arm.

“I can't stop you anymore, can I?”

I keep looking at her, not understanding why she grieves over something like that. As if to answer my glance, Maria opens her mouth.

“Tell me, Kazuki. What's my goal?”

She asks with a voice that sounds tragic in a way.

“Obtaining a 'box', right?”

“Exactly. I am trying to obtain a 'box'. I seek after the 'box' in order to make my 'wish' complete. I'm only together with you because 'O' seems to be interested in you. That's a just cause.”

“.....Yeah.”

“But I'm a 'box'. A being that's not allowed to be part of anyone's everyday life. Therefore, I'm naturally not supposed to be at someone's side. I mustn't associate

with anyone too deeply because I would destroy his everyday life. I can only be with you because there's a just cause."

"....."

"You started to change. I can't even guess your thoughts by your expression anymore. Bit by bit, that certain special connection between us has disappeared. ...well, our relationship was just a byproduct brought forth by Mogi's feelings, so it might only be natural that this would happen."

"That's---"

When I'm about to deny it reflexively, Maria stops me by covering my mouth.

"I don't need a tender lie. You should feel that we stopped being special, too."

".....Uh..."

"You're about to kill Koudai Kamiuchi. I know that your values won't return to how they were once you kill someone, even if it's an NPC. You're going to change even more. Your abnormal attachment to your everyday life will decrease and you'll become unable to master the 'box', like everyone else. And do you know what happens then?"

Maria says,

"'O' loses interest."

Her hands aren't covering my mouth anymore, but I'm still unable to open it.

“You ought to welcome that ‘O’ will leave you. In fact, I should be happy for you, too. But I can’t delight from the bottom of my heart. Not because I’ll lose the clue to obtaining a ‘box’. But because, when ‘O’ loses interest in you, I---”

“I lose the just cause that lets me be with you, Kazuki.”

Saying that, Maria presses her head against my shoulder.

“As soon ‘O’ doesn’t shadow you anymore, I’ll have to leave your side. Well, of course. I’m not able to achieve my goal otherwise.”

Aah, so that was it.

The thing Maria was afraid of for all the time since yesterday. No, even before then.

It’s---

It’s --- farewell.

“Kazuki, I won’t stop you anymore.”

Maria removes her head from my shoulder.

“I wasn’t allowed to stop you, really. I don’t have the right to, nor do I need to. But still, I should have known.”

Maria speaks with a resigned, gentle smile.

“That being able to be by your side is just a pipe dream.”

“-----”

Unable to look at her anymore, I turn towards the monitor.

To the message «Do you want to kill [Koudai Kamiuchi] by using [Deathblow]?», in my imagination, I add the following line: «Will you accept the farewell with [Maria Otonashi]?».

“...There’s,”

...no way I could accept that.

What is that! As soon I try to protect Maria, I have to bid her farewell?! Even though I know that she’s going to keep crying all alone once we’ve parted?!

«I can’t bear your death. It breaks my heart. I don’t want that. I want to be with you.»

Why can I never do anything?

Why can’t I do anything while knowing of Maria Otonashi’s feelings for me...!

...There must be a way. Being the «Knight», I should be able to free the captured Maria by killing someone.

Who is the one that tries to compel Maria into being all alone?

I think. Think, think, thinkthinkthinkthinkthink---

“-----Ah.”

.....I see.

“---Haa!”

I got it. I finally know who my enemy is!

Why didn't I notice earlier? The enemy was always close to me. We even met! And I even perceived that certain person as my enemy in the very beginning!

Freed from my doubt, I reach out for the button once again. «Do you want to kill [Koudai Kamiuchi] by using [Deathblow]?» I read the message and decide without any hesitation.

Yeah, I'll kill him!

I press the button that's displayed on Koudai Kamiuchi's picture.

“-----Aah,”

Maria lets out a long sigh.

“The pipe dream just ended, huh.”

“No!”

Indeed, I've just officially become a murderer and changed.

What I define as the «everyday life» I want to protect has changed.

I guess 'O' is going to leave me, as well is Maria as soon she realizes.

But---

“The person that's standing here right now is Maria without the 'Flawed Bliss'.”

If everything goes as planned, Maria will be able to get out of the 'Game of Idleness' without having a [vicarious experience].

She won't remember this conversation.

She will still be in the dark about my change.

“You aren’t a ‘box’ when you don’t have the ‘Flawed Bliss’.”

Maria seems to have trouble getting my point and looks at me with wide eyes.

“I told you in the second round that «It’s my job to protect you when you have lost your ‘box’». I will maintain this determination. Therefore, I will keep protecting you from the devils’ clutches.”

“...devils’ clutches? Like Kamiuchi and Oomine?”

“From them, too, but the greatest enemy is someone else.”

My goal has become saving Maria.

So, who has been hindering me the most from achieving that in the ‘Game of Idleness’... no, even before that?

Who is the detestable enemy that makes Maria think she had to throw her own life away?

What has to be done that Maria doesn’t have to die?

Originally, she shouldn’t have even needed my support to survive. With her skills, it shouldn’t be too hard to win [Kingdom Royale] when she’s the player.

But Maria can absolutely not kill anyone. She would rather neglect her own life.

That’s why she can definitely not win the ‘Game of Idleness’.

So, what has to be done that she’s able to win in [Kingdom Royale]?

I, the «Knight», have once pledged:

I'll save her, even if it means to betray everyone and make everyone my enemy.

Maria answered to that,

She has been waiting for me, it being her only strength.

Be it consciously or not, Maria is aware that she's being captured. And also that she can't do anything about it on her own.

By whom is she captured? Who's trying to make her the «king»? Who do I have to kill in order to free her?

I've finally got it.

“It's «Aya Otonashi».”

This is the name of my enemy.

The enemy I'm going to oppose from now on, and whom I've been opposing for a lifetime.

“I will defeat «Aya Otonashi». I'll teach her that there's no despair that can't be solved by one's everyday life and that there's no need to use a 'box'.”

There will be no farewell then.

Geez... «Aya Otonashi», how dare you involve «Maria Otonashi»! You're the only one that can't be together with me!

“-----What's that supposed to mean?”

Maria's eyes are wide open.

Fair enough. In those repeating days, Maria was able to finally form the ideal self, «Aya Otonashi», she's been longing for. And yet I'm telling her that I'm going to destroy that.

“Is that a --- proclamation of war?”

I answer with a smile.

“It's not!”

It might be a proclamation of war if I told it to the Maria in the real world. And after getting to know how I think, she would leave me.

But we're in [Kingdom Royale] here. It won't remain in Maria's memory.

“I know the Maria of the first ‘school transfer’.”

Maria's eyes are still wide open - apparently she doesn't understand why I've suddenly told her that.

“I can remember almost nothing of that time! But I know that there was a Maria who hadn't completely changed into «Aya Otonashi» yet. And I also remember that she said this:”

I repeat.

I repeat the words Maria has said when she stood on the podium that time.

“I want someone to be by my side.”

She clamps her lips and gazes fixedly at me.

“Maria. You aren't a ‘box’ right now. So, please tell me. Please tell me your, «Maria Otonashi's» feelings, and not those from «Aya Otonashi's» point of view.”

“.....Kazuki.”

A tender smile flashes on her face for a second, but her expression changes immediately to a stern one. She strains her lips and turns her back to me.

“I understood what you want me to say. But I can’t say it. No matter how much you say I’m not «Aya Otonashi» right now, that doesn’t mean that I can return to how I once was. I always wanted to be a ‘box’ and I still want to be one, even now. Saying what you want me to say is equal to denying my own intentions. Therefore---”

She clenches her fists.

“Therefore, I can’t possibly say it.”

Maria says,

“I can’t possibly say that I want you to save the lonely «Maria Otonashi».”

Aah.

That’s more than enough.

Maria’s feelings have reached me.

Now I have the resolve to defeat «Aya Otonashi» without holding back.

“I won’t leave you alone!”

Suddenly, a new thought strikes me.

I know the Maria from the first ‘school transfer’. But even then, she may have not completely turned into «Aya Otonashi» yet, but she was already an ‘owner’. She already had a will of iron at that time.

But was she really how «Maria Otonashi» was originally?

I don't think so. Originally she should have been more like an ordinary girl.

So, I don't know Maria Otonashi from when she was just a girl one year below me.

I don't know the Maria from the 0th time, that hadn't done a single 'school transfer' yet.

I'm sure that girl's inside Maria even now, crying. She's crying at the ground of that sea inside Maria's chest.

She's crying, all alone.

I will go meet her, then.

“I will go meet the <sup>Zero no Maria</sup> zeroth Maria.”

I'll go meet her, take her with me, embrace her and stay by her side.

I believe that that this is how Maria can truly become happy, therefore I will do it.

Maria had stopped clenching her fists at some point. I can't read her emotions from her rather downcast, gloomy face.

With purposely erased expression, Maria totters to me and presses her head against my chest.

“...I'm going to become a 'box'. I'm going to live for the sake of others. ...so, please stop. Please don't try to protect me anymore.”

She says these silly things with a frail voice I've never heard from her before.

Therefore, I'll answer her.

"Got it. I'll definitely go meet her!"

"...hey... you haven't got it at all. I don't want to let you suffer. I don't want you to become unhappy by associating too deeply with me. You're supposed to get away from me as soon as possible."

"Don't worry, I'll stay by your side!"

"Please go... please, part with me....."

There's no way I'd obey.

I mean, these are the words of my enemy, aren't they?

Therefore, I defy this request by embracing Maria.

Her body is so slender--it can definitely not be called strong--that, although I've already embraced her several times, I can't help but be surprised again at this helplessness of hers.

But I won't be surprised the next time.

Because I'm sure that this is the right impression. «Maria Otonashi» is just a young girl, so this helpless impression has to be correct.

"Maria."

Maria doesn't answer to my calls anymore. She only tries to hide her expression by pressing her head against my chest.

I'm confident that she has an expression right now she wouldn't ever show in reality. An expression she banned when she vowed to never depend on anyone.

I guess she can have this expression only because she has no ‘box’ right now. Just because we’re in [Kingdom Royale], she’s slightly showing me a part of her true self, something she would never ever show me in reality.

If it’s now, my words may reach «Maria Otonashi».

They may reach her in all honesty without being repelled by «Aya Otonashi».

I’m about to open my mouth, when---

“Kazuki.”

She tells me. The girl that embraces me with her trembling arms tells me,

“Even so, this is still a pipe dream.”

I know.

Therefore, I will change that fate.

### **Sixth Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Koudai Kamiuchi], [Kazuki Hoshino]'s room**

Even so, Maria won’t become «Aya Otonashi» anymore in this game. Therefore, she won’t die on her own accord.

I’ve done everything that had to be done.

This [Secret Meeting] is nothing but a diversion.

«The decided [Deathblow] - will be exEcuted - even when the - [Knight] diEs!»

According to the rules, [Deathblow] gets executed five minutes before the end of the <C>-block. Thus, Koudai Kamiuchi does still live for now.

But he has no means to survive.

After getting that confirmation from Noitan, Koudai Kamiuchi throws his knife on the table, smiling wryly.

“No use killing you, huh. Uwaa... Looks like I’m finished.”

He says lightheartedly as if it was about someone else, scratching his head.

Koudai Kamiuchi doesn’t voice a single grudge even though the person that initiated his death stands before his very eyes. He doesn’t even get emotional. Probably, he only thinks it was a failure to follow Daiya.

Even though he’s going to die.

I gaze at the knife he has thrown away.

The ‘Game of Idleness’, purely made to ward off boredom, huh.

Until now, I was unable to understand his extremely momentary way of thinking. That hasn’t changed. But when it became clear that he’s the ‘owner’ of the ‘Game of Idleness’ and I realized that this atmosphere belongs to Koudai Kamiuchi, there were some things I could figure out.

Koudai Kamiuchi can’t acquire the feeling of living in reality.

Everything that happens in his surroundings seems to him like being in a game; he doesn’t feel directly affected. Since he’s like that, I don’t think [Kingdom Royale] is so special for him. That’s also why his ‘wish’ could become an external ‘box’ while being so unrealistic.

Because of this nature, he also feels no sense of danger from being killed. Neither does he have feelings of guilt; it doesn't feel real to him even when he kills people, after all. I can understand that he would start to live for the moment and seek pleasure, then.

That's not so special, although it seldom gets this extreme. Even I can't claim that it felt real to me when I knew that I would die when losing this game.

That's where I stop thinking.

I mean, understanding him is pointless.

I take the knife on the table.

"Oh? What're you up to? Ah, perhaps you're angry that I killed Kaichou, so you want to kill me with your own hands?"

I shake my head.

"Not at all! I don't intend to have a dialogue with you. It's someone else who will, as it seems."

Koudai Kamiuchi looks puzzled at me.

"Noitan."

«What is - it?»

The green bear, who's still being displayed on the screen, answers.

"I think you are the symbolic figure for the 'Game of Idleness', Noitan. I think that if we took the nature of people that have only interest in killing time and made a mascot out of it, it would turn out like you."

«Mhh?»

"There's something I've always wanted to tell you."

Then I swing my knife towards the monitor and thrust it into it with all my might.

The knife's stuck in the green center.

"You're disgusting."

A crack appears in the middle of Noitan's forehead.

«-----A?»

The disgusting green bear disperses on the monitor. He turns into hundreds of pieces like a uncompleted puzzle. Noitan still curses at me «What're ya doing, bastard!» but his usual widely opened eyes aren't displayed on the broken monitor anymore. Only red fragments of those bloodshot eyes and his open mouth are still flickering.

It almost looks like he's bleeding.

But Noitan keeps cursing, unable to feel any pain from this disastrous scene. As if he hasn't realized the situation he is in.

It's pitiful.

Not noticing that, is pitiful.

Noitan then becomes even unable to maintain being just a hundreds of flickering green and red dots. He slowly stops flickering, loses the light and eventually disappears.

"...was there a meaning in doing that? You just destroyed the monitor, that's all."

Koudai Kamiuchi says coldly.

"So, what do you consider a meaningful action?"

"Hah...?"

Koudai Kamiuchi opens his mouth like a fool.

“Aah, well, maybe that doesn’t exist, huh. After all, everybody dies eventually.”

He gives me the answer I expected.

“Koudai Kamiuchi. Let’s assume there was a person who couldn’t find any meaning in things other than killing time.”

“What’s with that, all of a sudden? And hey, didn’t you omit the «-kun» just now?”

I continue, ignoring him.

“How can one win against such a person?”

“Jeez... what are you talking about? And anyway, that example’s me, right? I gather that much! But in that case, I guess it’s impossible to win against that guy, heh?”

“Why?”

“To make him lose, you see, he would have to come into the ring you’re in, right? If you throw things at a spectator outside the ring, then that’s just brute violence.”

I see. Indeed, he’s right.

“I see.”

I speak.

“So I just have to make you realize that you are in the ring.”

When I say this, Koudai Kamiuchi’s jaw drops open.

But he still hasn’t realized. He has not realized that every one of us is in this ring, all the time.

And he has doubtlessly lost now, being destined to die.

A bad excuse like «I don't remember having fought, so I haven't lost» won't hold now.

But I didn't feel like making him admit that now. I just keep saying what I think.

“You said that there are no meaningful things, right?”

“...yeah.”

“I don't know what has a meaning and what doesn't. Therefore, I think like this: I'll find a meaning then. I'll even find a meaning in this pastime of someone's.”

I figured out my goal in the 'Game of Idleness'.

I think that is very meaningful.

I found a meaning in this 'box', in the 'Game of Idleness' that's supposed to be meaningless.

I wonder if I can say the following then?

---I have denied the 'Game of Idleness'.

But he was unable to do that, therefore he kept losing, averting his eyes from reality, and he's going to keep losing, until he eventually breaks into pieces like Noitan.

But as I said, it's not me who will teach him that.

The one that will defeat Koudai Kamiuchi is Daiya Oomine.

However---

- [Koudai Kamiuchi], death because of [Deathblow].

## Tenth Day <D> [Big Room]

However, a certain thought persists in me.

“I would have done better.”

The food portions of Yuuri-san and the others have run out; only two portions are left in total. I have handed those to Daiya and Maria, so I’m already out of food.

It’s finally time for the «real Daiya» to get started.

I suddenly think:

Daiya was only able to pull off all that secret maneuvering because his turn came before mine. If I had been first, it would be me that’s confronting Koudai Kamiuchi.

In that case, I wouldn’t have needed to have such a hard fight.

At best, we wouldn’t even have had to play [Kingdom Royale].

Yuuri-san and Iroha-san wouldn’t have had to suffer so much, at least, and I’m sure there wouldn’t have been the need to kill Koudai Kamiuchi.

I think, while gazing at the blue watch Daiya has returned to me.

I guess Daiya was wishing for this awful outcome. So he is my enemy, after all.

But he shouldn’t truly be wishing for all that. He may not be aware of it, but he should have wanted to see an outcome where everyone can smile.

“That’s what you get when you think of the ‘box’ as hope!”

Daiya doesn’t react to my words and just keeps touching his right piercing.

Alright, I’ll leave the rest to you, Daiya.

And also, goodbye!

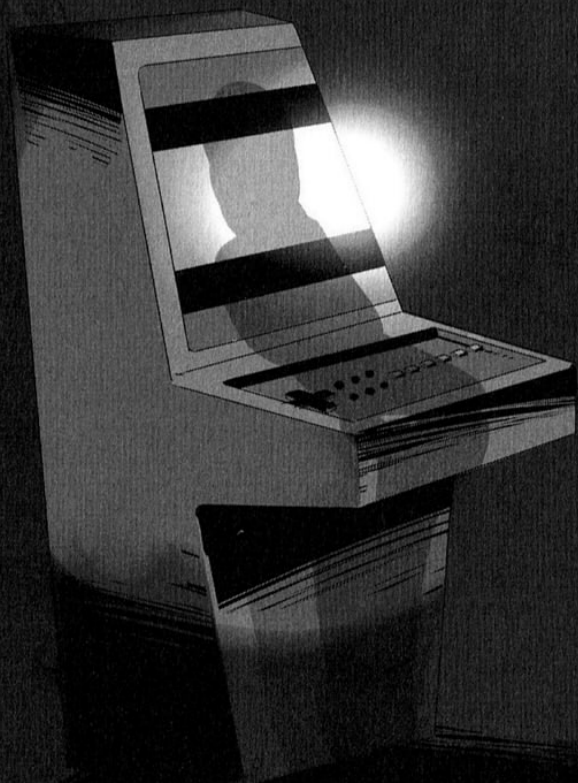
I don’t want to meet you anymore.

I mean, if we meet again, you will have used the ‘box’. Even though you can’t master it anyway.

When that time comes, I will try to destroy your ‘box’ for certain.

And that’s when we’re going to become enemies for real.

Therefore, I don’t want to meet you anymore.



MASTER ROOM

*During middle school I went out with some boring girl.*

*Well, sure enough, for a middle schooler she was pretty stylish and her slender legs that looked out from her shortened school skirt were attractive enough to arouse me.*

*But her tremendous lack of intelligence and dignity blanked that attractiveness out. She spoke ill of others all the time and she wasn't even able to make it sound funny in the least. She was boring. Annoying. Therefore, I learned how to reflexively give her empty answers and simultaneously solved some equations in my head instead.*

*Since I would never approach someone like her, I think she was the one that confessed, but I wonder why I accepted going out with her, of all the people that confessed to me? Because of sexual desire?*

*Actually, I have a preference for obedient girls. Come to think of it, there was a girl I was attracted to who fit that image perfectly. She was the archetype of a dark girl, having her gaze lowered, with long hair that looked like the hair of a Japanese doll and wearing bulky glasses. But her face hidden by that long hair was, if you looked close enough, very pretty and charming. I had the illusion of being the only one who noticed that and felt an odd sense of excitement, like it was my own personal secret.*

*...ohh, that's right. When I learned that she already had a boyfriend, I was so shocked that I accidentally accepted the confession of the boring girl, «Rino».*

*But while she may have bored me, she seemed to be rather popular.*

*Shortly after I started going out with her, I was called to the back of the gym. By a fair-haired classmate who the teachers had already given up on.*

*“Hey, asshole. Are you looking for trouble?”*

*is what that simpleton said, even though there’s no way I’d look for that since I had never really talked with him. Then, after listening to him for a while, I finally noticed that going out with her was the reason for his sudden abuse.*

*“Split up with Rino, you cheeky prick!”*

*Eventually, my fair-haired classmate pocketed his strange pride when I kept not understanding him, grabbed me by the collar and urged me like that.*

*Since I wasn’t particularly attached to her, I could have just said “Aah, okay, I don’t mind,” but well, I was still a brat back then and felt offended by his unreasonable demand. Consequentially I responded «Why should I obey such an order?». I think I also added a most correct statement along the lines of «Don’t hold a grudge against me just because you’re unable to get a girlfriend! What a wimp.»*

*Well, and that’s how I started being the victim of violence.*

*If he hadn’t come pick a quarrel with me, I would have split up with that boring girl long before, but because I was pissed off by that, I kept going out with her. You know what, blondie? You just shot yourself in the leg.*

*By the way, to proceed to another subject, I love my mother. She's young, I think she's pretty and most of all she brought me up all on her own. I heard my dad was an awful person who had tried to force my 17-year old, pregnant mother to abort me through violence when he got wind of it. Because of that, my mother's been telling me "Never use violence" all the time. "Violence can't solve anything!"*

*It may not sound real, but I still think that's right. Her saying has properly taken root in me.*

*Thus, I didn't fight back when the fair head kept abusing me.*

*But when you're being abused, traces remain. Because of my unceasing bruises, my mother started to suspect that I was picking quarrels all the time, in other words, that I used violence. "How did you get that bruise?", "Didn't you ignore my instructions?", "Haven't you started to resemble that man I hate more than anyone?"*

*I disappointed my beloved mother because I've been obeying her instructions. Just how unreasonable is that? I had to bring that to an end.*

*So I thought it was okay to use violence once for that purpose since it couldn't be helped.*

*I called blondie to the back of the gym. Well, there was no way I'd lose to such a inferior fair-haired monkey. I hit him. I kicked him. After a few punches and kicks, the fair-haired monkey was already unable to stand anymore. Since I couldn't allow him to spread around that I used violence, I decided to seal his mouth by threatening him. That fair-*

*haired monkey was quite stubborn. I used force on him until he lost consciousness. Until then, I did things like plucking off his hair, tearing off his fingernails, pissing on him or making him eat a centipede. In the end I took all his clothes and left him behind in the gym where some girls were doing club activities. By now I think I went too far but I may have had bottled up more anger than expected.*

*Before that fair-haired monkey lost consciousness, he said, "You asshole, you don't even love Rino. You're just using her as a substitute for your jerk-off material. That's why I won't permit it." Maybe he loved that boring girl, quite honestly.*

*I didn't give a shit.*

*Monkeys have no human rights.*

*It was rather the opposite; after that human-to-rag incident I got even more irritated because of him. Wasn't he just a small fry, really? And such a small fry had been hurting me all this time? He even made me break the taboo of using violence?! Such an inferior monkey has?*

*Don't mess around with me. Because of you, I tasted it! The enjoyment of control through violence.*

*Until then, I had been unable to defend myself against that scum, that acted tough just because they had enough guts to pick fights with others...although they actually were vastly inferior to me. I mean, they only care about who's strong and who's not. For them, other abilities like intelligence, sportiness, and such don't even matter. I can't stand such values. They are only trash for relying solely on*

*violence that can't solve anything. They're an inferior bunch. Their lives are worthless, just like my father who tried to kill me before my birth.*

*But then again, they submit to violence.*

*There's no meaning in that. It's pointless to compel such a bunch of inferior monkeys into submission. At most, you can feel pleasure. But that's reason enough to use violence.*

*Violence is alright, if it's for pleasure.*

*My ethics sure are outstandingly right, if I may say so myself.*

*I called that fair head again. He had been frantically fleeing from me since that incident, but when I told him that I would gang-rape Rino in a hotel if he didn't appear, he turned up readily. I took with me some of my classmates, apparently blondie's ex-buddies, and Rino with her friends and lead the fair head to a ditch. It was an unhygienic knee-deep river in which one could see things like the corpse of a dog quite often.*

*"Hey monkey! You're in the swimming club, right?" I asked. "It may sound surprising, but I'm rather bad at swimming, you know?" I said while looking at Rino who was giggling.*

*"Can you demonstrate to me here how to swim?"*

*Of course, I didn't let him reject. When I pointed out, "Whoa, don't tell me you want to swim with your clothes on! Do you have no common sense?" he voluntarily undressed with the exception of his shorts. Naturally, I*

*didn't allow that and made him take off his underpants as well. "Iih!" Rino and her friends exclaimed with brainless voices.*

*The fair head started to swim. One could see that he frantically tried to look expressionless. When I ordered him to do a butterfly, he showed us a dynamic butterfly inside the ditch. That scene looked so funny that I kicked him while laughing out loud. Half of the present students were turned off by his appearance, drinking muddy water, but Rino was laughing and clapping her hands together.*

*I started to talk with Rino so that the blond head could hear. "Rino, let's go to a hotel afterwards." "Eh? D-Don't talk about that in front of everyone, Kou-chan! It's embarrassing!" "You don't want to?" "It's... not like I don't want to, of course." "Let's go then." "...Okay."*

*"Please do something like you did the other day, that was so hot!" "Well, I don't mind... hey, don't talk about that in front of everyone, seriously! Ooh, you silly ~"*

*The fair head threw up into the ditch.*

*As promised, I led Rino to a hotel afterwards. A group of men were already waiting there. I received some money from the unknown men and went home, leaving Rino behind in the hotel.*

*Of course I told the fair head about that.*

*I didn't see him ever since.*

*Oh dear, violence sure solves nothing. It only brings forth new hatred. You had to go through all that trouble because you carelessly used violence, you know?*

*But also, I had to compensate for using violence.*

*That ditch incident became a quite serious matter, so in the end, my mother got wind of it. Having learned about the details, she started to fear me and treat me like a stranger. By now, there's almost no conversation between us anymore. Although... I still love her so much.*

*However, I kept betraying her. I continued using violence. I couldn't endure not feeling the pleasure of using violence regularly.*

*I still think you can't solve anything by using violence. But you destroy absolutely anything and everything. Everyone can get ruined by someone's violence, no matter how high his social status is, no matter how greatly renowned he is, no matter how much money he has. When I use violence while making myself aware that it is destroying the victim's life, a white light runs from my head through my entire body and tickles my heart as if to melt it. And that feels so good, I can't stop.*

*I bet even I will be destroyed by someone one day.*

*When I imagine my insides melting in sulphuric acid, I feel really at ease for some reason. I can acquire an unbelievable sense of relief just by picturing how I liquefy myself.*

*I don't care why that is.*

*I just wonder if that liquid appearance would be my correct form...if it would have been better not to come out in human shape after having been totally damaged by my father's violence.*

***“Do you have a wish?”***

*So, how should I answer such a question?*

*What wish could I have when I'm going to be ruined some day?*

*I --- no, not just me. Everyone will lose everything in the end anyway. So is there really something that has a meaning? If there is, by all means, let me know.*

*When I understood that nothing had a meaning, everything became oh so boring. «Boredom» is, like Daiya Oomine said, a beast and tries to devour me.*

*So I'm satisfied as long as I just can ward off this boredom.*

*Thus, I created the 'Game of Idleness' and started [Kingdom Royale].*



### ***First Round of [Kingdom Royale]***

*Everything was so fresh, it really was enjoyable. The killing and deceiving was exactly as I had expected, so I was moved by how much this was the game I wished for.*

*Mh, but now that I think of it, maybe it lacked some tension because Daiya Oomine as [Revolutionary] was too strong. That guy plus [Revolutionary]? Talk about overpowered!*

### ***Second Round of [Kingdom Royale]***

*Awesome. There was also plenty of fan service, so it was great to watch. When Yuuri-chan begged me to kill Kazuki Hoshino right after seducing me, I really had to laugh my heart out.*

*But seriously, Yuuri-chan's just too scary. Right at the end when she killed my NPC, she made me unwary by acting a psychologically disturbed expressionless character with tears all over her face and stabbed me when I drew closer to comfort her! She sure is a fiend. A devil, indeed. How can I trust women any longer?*

### ***Third Round of [Kingdom Royale]***

*It all happened so fast, I had to laugh. Kaichou's face was just too scary when she killed Yuuri-chan first. Well, such a development is also quite enjoyable once in a while, I guess.*

### ***And at last, Fourth Round of [Kingdom Royale]***

*Because I started getting tired of the game and Kazuki Hoshino tried to prevent everyone from killing on top of that, there weren't as many enjoyable scenes. He sure doesn't know what's good. Let them kill more, seriously! Let them deceive each other! Just drop that friendship and reconciliation stuff. I don't need such drama.*

*Well, and hence I lacked concentration while watching the fourth round of [Kingdom Royale]. I didn't watch the scenes that had no interesting events like someone dying seriously.*

*That's also why I wasn't all that focused when I watched the [Secret Meeting] between Daiya Oomine and Kazuki Hoshino.*

*«You haven't won against me at all.»*

*Until I heard that conceited line from Kazuki Hoshino.*

*What's that idiot who's mistaking the 'owner' saying? - I smiled wryly with these thoughts at first, but after watching their exchange and expressions thereafter, I suddenly felt like this:*

*Has he noticed that I'm the 'owner', perhaps?*

*Because I hadn't really been concentrating, I couldn't really tell. But that's what it looks like, to me at least. Well, I don't think Kazuki Hoshino would be able to do anything even if he knew.*

*But as I further watched them after that, I got that same hunch again.*

*Are those two secretly conspiring?*

*It's possible that Daiya Oomine's scheming something. Rather, it's better to assume he's scheming something.*

*But I doubt that Kazuki Hoshino knows the details of his plan. I didn't see Daiya Oomine telling him about it directly, either. To begin with, is it really possible to cooperate in that situation?*

*Or rather than cooperating, did Kazuki Hoshino comprehend his plan and approve of it silently?*

*I peek into the game machine. Kazuki Hoshino, who's going to turn into a mummy shortly, is murmuring something to the Daiya Oomine in the game.*

*He is saying this.*

*«I would have done better.»*

*What on earth is he talking about?*

*Suddenly, I notice that Daiya Oomine, who has been watching the screen as serious as if he was praying, has raised his head and is gazing at me.*

*But still, I think I've seen his face sometime in the past... Unless I am mistaken, Oomine-senpai was in the same middle school as me? But I don't remember having seen that guy's pretty face amongst the older students that pierced themselves, ignoring the school rules.*

*"Hey you. You had a girlfriend during middle school, right?"*

*Daiya Oomine suddenly asks such a weird question.*

*"I had several, so I don't know which one you mean... but I guess it's Rino you're talking about?"*

*"...Right, her."*

*"You're acquainted?"*

*Come to think of it, what was Rino's full name again? «Rino» was just a pet name derived from her surname if memory serves me right.*

*"I know her since childhood, you know. Therefore, I'm also informed of what you did to her."*

*Oomine-senpai says plainly.*

*He was expressionless while speaking. But this lack of expression felt kinda creepy, too, so I get a certain thought.*

*"Perhaps, are you out for revenge?"*

*But he doesn't move a muscle.*

*“Do you plot revenge on me because you can’t forgive me for leaving your cherished Rino behind in that hotel? And that’s why you did that introductory role for [Kingdom Royale], in order to--- um, no, I have no idea why you would bother to do that?”*

*I say while scratching my head.*

*“Revenge? Not at all. I’m merely doing this for my goal. I did those introductions simply because I realized that observing the game would act as a step to achieve my goal.”*

*“Your goal, hmmm... Oh? Weren’t you an ‘owner’, Senpai? Couldn’t you achieve your goal easily by using your ‘box’?”*

*“Yeah, indeed.”*

*I raise an eyebrow when he agrees.*

*“So, why don’t you just use it? Do you want to play pretentious or something?”*

*“Hmpf, don’t think everyone’s like you. Not everyone can easily believe that their ‘wish’ would be granted! I’m a realist!”*

*Now that he mentions it, the ‘boxes’ also grant feelings of resignation like «that can’t come true» along with the ‘wish’, as far as I know.*

*“I understood right away that I couldn’t master the ‘box’ when I heard the details from ‘O’. Well, that’s why I didn’t use it after obtaining it, and started searching instead.”*

*Daiya Oomine flashed a slight grin.*

*“For a way to master the ‘box’.”*

*When he said that, he seemed a little creepy to me again. Although he speaks like always, his words are somehow heavy, and sharp.*

*“...How do you search for a way to master something like that?”*

*“Sure, it’s not something you can search for. But I was lucky in a sense. During the conversation with ‘O’, I found out that Kazuki Hoshino was holding the hint I needed. On top of that, I was accidentally involved in this ‘box’, and able to meet another person beside Kazu who could master the ‘box’.”*

*“...Me?”*

*“Exactly.”*

*I finally get what he meant by «step» for achieving his goal.*

*Daiya Oomine had to become able to master the ‘box’ for his goal. Therefore, he didn’t try to slip out of this ‘box’.*

*Right---*

*“To discover the means to master the ‘box’ by observing the two of you.”*

*That’s the step.*

*Daiya Oomine exploited the ‘Game of Idleness’ in order to observe us. In order to discover the means he needs to master his ‘box’.*

*“...But how can observation help you there? I mean, we can master the ‘box’ because, well, we’re humans that just can. And I think it’s impossible to imitate someone’s human nature.”*

*"I guess so. No one can change his nature. For instance, I can't imitate your human nature of hating boredom. But more than because of your human nature, you could master the 'box' because your 'wish' was within your scope. I could find the answer to mastering the 'box' in that fact."*

*"...? What do you mean by 'wish' within my scope?"*

*"In the first place, the 'wish' you put into the 'box' wasn't anything grand, right?"*

*"Well... yeah. I only wanted to stave off boredom."*

*"Right. Everyone would think that a simple diversion can come true. But if it's something like [Kingdom Royale], I'm sure even you don't think it's possible in reality, right? But you didn't care about the details of the game. You were satisfied as long as [Kingdom Royale] would be fun for you. Therefore, it didn't even matter whether you could believe the game system or not."*

*"...I think you lost me there... but well, yeah, if it had been a 'wish' like «redoing it no matter how often one dies», even I would have been unable to believe."*

*"That's exactly what I mean. It didn't only look like you mastered the 'box' because of your human nature, but also because you tried to grant your 'wish' indirectly."*

*Oomine-senpai chuckles and continues.*

*"Thanks to you, I figured out my way to master the 'box'. For example, let's say that I want to destroy the world."*

*"Quite an aggressive 'wish', huh."*

*"However, if I put in the 'wish' to destroy the world, I could still not help but have doubts in the depths of my mind. But in fact, it's possible to destroy the world with*

*objects that already exist in it. Nuclear weapons and such. Of course I can believe the existence of nuclear weapons. And by now I'm also able to imagine obtaining them."*

*"Why?"*

*"Because, by diving into the 'Game of Idleness', I experienced the miracles of the 'boxes' firsthand. I experienced this much power, so I can believe as much as that the 'box' can make anything come true."*

*"...Aah, so watching the power of the 'box' was also part of the reason for your observation?"*

*"Right."*

*Geez, just in how many layers does that guy think...*

*"If it's a 'wish' of the level of obtaining a «tool» to destroy the world, I could already make it come true, despite being a realist."*

*I'm still a bit unsure whether I have understood his reasoning or not, but in short it's like this:*

*Daiya Oomine can already use the 'box'.*

*"-----"*

*The instant I realize that, I get the chills.*

*I have a really bad presentiment.*

*Probably because of that presentiment, I unknowingly ask him.*

*I ask in the flow of the conversation, although I'm supposed to be disinterested even if he really wanted to destroy the world.*

*"So, what is your 'wish'?"*

*Then, at once.*

*Daiya Oomine's atmosphere changed completely.*

*Although I noticed his slight creepiness, I have just given him the last push.*

*"You know, there are kinds of people I can't stand."*

*He touches his right piercing expressionlessly.*

*"It's about those people that have stopped thinking for themselves. They act like they would be thinking, but they really just accept others' opinions and get manipulated. They have no self, so to speak. There's no worth in their lives. I can't stand that depraved scum that has barely enough brains to follow others' opinions, has no target and clings to the feed that's before their eyes like a bunch of hogs. It makes me sick just to breathe the same air as them."*

*"...aren't you getting a bit carried away?"*

*Daiya Oomine scowls with cold eyes at me.*

*"Because they devour."*

*"What---"*

*"At times they even devour virtuous people."*

*Seized by his cold gaze, I can't move.*

*"You should already be able to guess my 'wish', and my goal, right?"*

*He flashes an odd smile, with only the right side raised, and says,*

*"My 'wish' is --- to exterminate all that scum."*

*Daiya Oomine doesn't hide his hostility anymore. He turns his eyes to me. While they look calm at first glance, they seem to have become darker and darker after a long succession of years, until eventually a light of insanity has started to dwell in them.*

*"Hey, are you listening, Koudai Kamiuchi? Or should I rather address you like this?"*

*Then, he declares it.*

*"You hog that has stopped thinking, sunk in boredom."*

*That he's my enemy and will exterminate me.*

*"-----Haha,"*

*A dry laugh leaks from me.*

*Exterminate me?*

*That's a bad joke. Or it should be. Right now he has no weapon, so he can't possibly win against me as I'm used to the world of empty-handed violence. That's for sure.*

*And yet, why on earth do I feel like that?*

*What's that cold shiver that's running down my spine?  
What's that fear that arises from the depths of my heart?*

*"Kamiuchi, what do you think will happen to Kazuki Hoshino now?"*

*He suddenly changes the subject.*

*".....he's going to die by turning into a mummy, right?"*

*Daiya Oomine chuckles.*

*"The heck? Are you making light of him? Do you seriously believe that he didn't do anything although he was aware of his approaching death?"*

*"...yeah, well, I mean, what should he do?"*

*“As expected from a brainless hog. Don’t think he’s like you! That cheeky fellow has merely understood what I’m up to.”*

*Daiya Oomine says with a wry smile.*

*“Kazuki Hoshino won’t die. Because I will destroy this rotten ‘box’ called ‘Game of Idleness’ before that can happen. He understood that.”*

*He disinterestedly looks at me as if he’s looking at the broken lead of a pencil.*

*“It’s evident how I will do it, right?”*

*He says,*

*“I’ll crush the ‘Game of Idleness’ by killing you.”*

*Like the Grim Reaper announcing my death.*

*“.....Uh...”*

*No, I can’t stay calm. I’m drenched in cold sweat as if my body senses the truth behind his words.*

*What on earth is this sensation? I shouldn’t have to fear him so much; in [Kingdom Royale], Kaichou and me killed his NPC after all.*

*But where does this self-confidence of his come from?*

*And why do I feel so cornered?*

*“.....You think you can win against me with force?”*

*I manage to squeeze out this sentence somehow.*

*Daiya Oomine contorts the shape of his mouth and says in an absolutely composed manner,*

*“Not at all.”*

*“Hah?”*

*What’s that guy babbling? So what’s with that attitude?*

*“Why so surprised? There’s no way I could win against you in a direct fight. Leaving aside my physical condition, I was an honor student and almost never involved in a quarrel, you see. I have no experiences in martial arts, either. Well, I guess it would work out somehow if I was prepared to go for a simultaneous KO.”*

*“...why are you so confident, then?”*

*“That goes without saying,” he begins to speak.*

*“Because it has already ended.”*

*“Hah?”*

*Right when I let out such an idiotic sound again, my body gets seized.*

*“?!”*

*Not by Daiya Oomine. He’s still standing before my eyes, even crossing his arms.*

*His associate...? No, that can’t be. This is a space created by the ‘Game of Idleness’.*

*But I’m being seized by something. The head of the person that’s holding me down touches me.*

*I turn my head around. I can only see the top of his head.*

*Long hair... a woman?*

*She’s much smaller than me and doesn’t seem very robust.*

*“-----gh!”*

*But for some reason I can’t free my arm from her grip, due to whatever kind of trick she uses.*

*The long-haired girl in a pajama raises her head that she has pressed against my back.*

*When I see her face---*

*«You haven't won against me at all.»*

*That phrase flashes through my mind for some reason.*

*The basis for Daiya Oomine's self-confidence was that he knew that she would appear and save him by restraining me.*

*And I'm sure Kazuki Hoshino realized that, too, in that [Secret Meeting]. I don't have the foggiest idea how he would be able to conclude so much, but he realized.*

*And he tried to make sure I would not notice outside the game machine that Daiya Oomine's planning to kill me. Because he knew that, in the worst case, I would kill Daiya Oomine if I got wind of it.*

*Wait? Why didn't she save him right away? Perhaps, did she only help him because certain conditions have been met?*

*What are those conditions, then?*

*Why does that woman need to help Daiya Oomine?  
Would his death bother her?*

*Assuming Daiya Oomine died here - what would happen? Daiya Oomine would fail to realize his intentions. The 'Game of Idleness' would not be destroyed. [Kingdom Royale] would be continued. Then---*

*---Kazuki Hoshino would turn into a mummy and die.*

*“.....”*

*«You can survive if nobody kills anyone during those eight days.»*

*Daiya Oomine told him this lie. But, something felt strange. Why did he tell such a crude lie even though he didn't tell any when it would have been useful?*

*...I try to construct a hypothesis.*

*A hypothesis, according to which his lie was, in fact, the truth.*

*If everyone was alive, they would all become mummies on the eighth day because of their food running out, and die. Of course, Kazuki Hoshino would die as well. Just like it's about to happen to him right now.*

*«You asked him in detail about that week, didn't you?»*

*I don't know what he means by 'that week'. I couldn't know.*

*But probably, they could acquire this information from that week:*

*Right, those two---*

*---knew that this woman will appear when Kazuki Hoshino is about to die and prevent it. Therefore, they also knew that, consequentially, he can survive if no one dies for --- no, as long Kazuki Hoshino is about to turn into a mummy.*

*“---hehe...”*

*The girl whose face is completely unknown to me raises the corners of her mouth.*

*“.....Who are you?”*

*She answers.*

*“Nana Yanagi.”*

*“.....Nana Yanagi?”*

*“Aah, maybe this name makes more sense to you.”  
The girl says with a mysterious smile.*

*“I’m ‘O’!”*

*Daiya Oomine flashes a scornful smile.*

*“Hmpf, so you chose to turn into Kazu’s first crush.  
What’s your point by using Nana Yanagi’s appearance?”*

*“There’s no deep meaning, really. I merely supposed that  
it would be the most interesting to meet him in this  
appearance! Well, but it seems like I won’t have occasion  
to show him, thanks to you.”*

*“But strictly speaking, Kazu has seen you right when he  
came here, hasn’t he?”*

*“Well, yes. But he was so cruel and stepped on me. On  
top of that, he didn’t even recognize me. Boy, at least you  
should be able to recognize your first crush at a glance!”*

*“Anyhow, it surprises me that Nana Yanagi looked like  
this. I thought it would be another beauty because our  
picky Kazu was in love with her, but that visage is really  
nothing special, huh.”*

*“That’s rude to her!”*

*While listening to their strange exchange of words, I  
think:*

*‘O’?*

*‘O’ he said?*

*Aah, certainly. Only ‘O’ is capable of such a mysterious  
smile. ‘O’ is about the only one that could ignore the rules  
and intervene. Therefore, I can understand it.*

*But why should this inhuman being, 'O', who could even be called a god, help Daiya Oomine? Why should he need to save Kazuki Hoshino's life?*

*Why were they able to predict 'O' 's behavior?*

*Daiya Oomine laughs at me while I'm confused thinking about these matters.*

*"You look like you're wondering why 'O' saved us. I'll tell you, no problem!"*

*Then he says,*

*"'O' loves Kazuki Hoshino. Didn't you know?"*

*".....that doesn't explain anything."*

*"You sure are slow on the uptake. It's natural to save a guy you love when he's about to die!"*

*"So you predicted that?"*

*"Not predicted. I knew. Well, because I asked in detail about what happened during the 'Sevennight in Mud'."*

*There's no way I could understand from such an unfriendly explanation. In the first place, what is that 'Sevennight in Mud'? ...But well, I guess 'O' saved Kazuki Hoshino in that week... or tried to. Thus, he knew that 'O' would come.*

*Because he knew that, he took advantage. In order to dispose of me and my 'Game of Idleness' after figuring out how to use the 'box', he utilized 'O'.*

*He utilized a godlike being.*

*"-----"*

*What the fuck?*

*How did he come up with the thought of utilizing such a being in the first place? That's something I'd never, ever be able to think of.*

*Someone that arrives at that thought---*

*---cannot be human.*

*Aah, now I've got it... why I'm so frightened.*

*I have never met a person who's more skillful than me, so to speak. Or at least I haven't perceived anyone that way. I always thought I was stronger, no matter who I was looking at.*

*But now I know better. Compared to that guy, I'm---  
---overwhelmingly inferior.*

*“-----Ah.”*

*My body sways.*

*It feels like a sensation of giddiness, but it doesn't stop. My legs have sunk deep into the ground of this dark room that smells like dissolvent. ...no, that's not really happening. Probably, it just seems this way to me.*

*What, what is happening to me?*

*Someone's laughing at me. “Ahahahaha,” he ridicules me. It's neither Daiya Oomine nor ‘O’ who does this. That black shadow is trying to kick me, to take me over.*

*---Who are you?*

*I had a hunch that it was my father of whom I had not even seen a photo. With the desire to throw grudges at him, I scowl at the appearing shadow. But as soon I focus on him, my father dissolves and becomes another person.*

*Aah, I know that one.*

*---It's... me.*

*"Geez... ridiculous how it is exactly as expected."*

*Daiya Oomine complains.*

*Yeah, I bet.*

*I'm going to be destroyed now, as expected. Just like I have done with other people for all the time until now.*

*So, maybe I can finally go to the place I've always sought. Maybe I can finally become what I've wanted to.*

*'O' lets go of me.*

*I slump down and land on all fours.*

*My hands touch the ground of this space. It feels like touching rotten meat. It's strangely warm, yet it's rough and crumbles in my hands.*

*That makes me finally realize.*

*This space is --- disgusting.*

*"Yes, as expected, I suppose."*

*'O' repeats Daiya Oomine's words.*

*"Well, but I guess it's also as Kazuki Hoshino-kun has expected."*

*"...what do you want to say by that?"*

*“There’s no hidden meaning! By the way, Daiya Oomine-kun. I would also like to ask you something.”*

*‘O’ looks at Daiya Oomine as if I have already disappeared from his sight.*

*“It’s a question concerning your contradicting actions. I had trouble understanding why someone like you would do something that’s not beneficial, you see.”*

*“...what do you mean?”*

*“Hehe, you don’t have to hide it! Your plan took advantage of my fondness for Kazuki Hoshino-kun. Which means that it wouldn’t have worked if I hadn’t come to the rescue. So why---”*

*“It’s not like it wouldn’t work without you.”*

*Daiya Oomine interrupts ‘O’ and starts to explain.*

*“To begin with, I don’t have to destroy the ‘box’ because I already won [Kingdom Royale] and survived. And while I was confident you would come, I didn’t have proof. This rescue measure was out of pity because Kazuki Hoshino tried his best although he ultimately lost. If he had won our little match, I would have done something about it even without you... after all, I promised! With the preparedness for a simultaneous defeat, in that case.”*

*“Pity, huh... But I think you should know which one of you was really pitied? Anyhow, I didn’t ask for that explanation.”*

*‘O’ calmly tears Daiya Oomine’s words into pieces.*

*“Please don’t evade my question. Let me formulate my concern once more. Even though you need me to come---”*

*‘O’ asks.*

*“You tried to change Kazuki Hoshino-kun to make me lose interest.”*

*“-----”*

*“Kazuki-kun should have been able to let everyone survive for eight days. But in order to change him, you tricked Koudai Kamiuchi’s NPC into killing Iroha Shindou and made it impossible for him to win. Why did you do that when you only needed me to come?”*

*Daiya Oomine scowls at ‘O’.*

*“You sure are kind. You wanted to save your friend, Kazuki-kun, right? You wanted to free him from me, right? Well, naturally I have not lost my interest due to such a slight change yet.”*

*‘O’ continues with a smile.*

*“But it’s certain that it reduced the probability that I would come! It’s nothing like you to reduce your own likelihood of winning.”*

*“...indeed, I took some actions that could be taken like that. But it’s my NPC who did. My NPC merely misunderstood my intentions and acted on his own accord - that’s all. In fact, my NPC didn’t know that Kazuki Hoshino would die if you didn’t come to the rescue. Even I make such slight mistakes.”*

*“But even if it was a misunderstanding of your NPC, would he really have done that without wanting to change Kazuki-kun, being an exact copy of you? Besides, that’s definitely a lie. Didn’t you just say that everything was as expected?”*

*“That was a figure of speech.”*

*"I don't think so. It was exactly as you expected. Also, I think you wouldn't have let Kazuki Hoshino just die if I didn't appear. I'm sure you would have tried to kill Koudai Kamiuchi - with the preparedness for a simultaneous defeat, in that case."*

*"Don't talk nonsense. Why should I sacrifice myself for Kazu?"*

*"Because you were the one pitied."*

*Daiya Oomine is bereft of speech.*

*"Letting the person who pitied you and silently approved of your plan die because your plan failed? That's definitely not something your pride would allow you."*

*".....what makes you so sure?"*

*"That's what Kazuki Hoshino thinks like, not me."*

*"What?"*

*"Kazuki-kun doesn't put confidence in my whims, sadly. Therefore, he didn't think your plan would work for certain. And yet he entrusted you with his life. You should know the reason by now, with your wits, right?"*

*Daiya Oomine widens his eyes and bites on his lips.*

*"He was convinced that you would save him even if your plan failed."*

*Daiya Oomine seems mortified for some reason, but 'O' continues,*

*"Indeed, as Kazuki Hoshino-kun has expected."*

*"---Just how much is he messing around with me!"*

*"Hehe, he's not messing around with you. He just understands you, doesn't he?"*

*“Shut up. ...I got it already. All right, I’ll admit it! I tried to break you and Kazu apart. You’re blaming me because you’re bothered by that, right?”*

*“That’s also true, right.”*

*“Don’t worry. I won’t do that anymore. If he stands in my way from now on, I will take advantage of him and fight against him, that’s all.”*

*“I see.”*

*“But sure enough, I think a light-minded smile fits him best. I don’t want him to have anything to do with those ‘boxes’. It’s the best if he has his everyday life.”*

*“Oh? Why did you try to change his goal into protecting Maria Otonashi, then? Isn’t associating with her also something that keeps him away from an everyday life, I wonder?”*

*Daiya Oomine bites on his lips.*

*“.....that’s the only thing my NPC could think of to dissociate him from you.”*

*“Indeed, that could be possible. But judging from your expression, that’s not all there is to it.”*

*‘O’ says and claps his hands artificially as if he had suddenly understood something.*

*“Right. Let me tell you something good, that may even put you in the right way. Maybe I should also tell Kazuki Hoshino-kun and Maria Otonashi.”*

*‘O’ says joyfully while Daiya Oomine raises an eyebrow,*

*“This girl --- Nana Yanagi --- is alive! Ah, incidentally, her boyfriend Touji Kijima is, as well.”*

*Raising his eyebrow even more, Daiya Oomine asks,*

*“...if they still live, then where are they?”*

*‘O’ nods contentedly to his reaction and answers,*

*“In Maria Otonashi’s ‘box’!”*

*Daiya Oomine stands still with widened eyes.*

*“Did you understand now that Maria Otonashi is someone that disconnects him from his everyday life? So if you really want to achieve your goal, you ought to ignore your own feelings and just hook them up!”*

*“...what are you talking about.”*

*“You want to hook Kazuki Hoshino-kun up, don’t you?”*

*Then, ‘O’ says it.*

*“With Kokone Kirino.”*

*He says --- this nostalgic, dear name.*

*“You always thought that Kokone Kirino and Kazuki-kun would be a good match. You assumed that it would be the best if love would sprout between them, to bring her happiness. Because Kazuki-kun would not reject her whatever he learned about her. And yet you used violence against Kazuki-kun when it was about to happen because of Riko Asami. And also this time, you tried to make protecting Maria Otonashi his goal. To me, it seems like your actions are not consistent with your goal.”*

*“.....Shut up.”*

*“You want to dedicate your own life to your goal, right? But at the present time, you can’t match Maria Otonashi or Iroha Shindou by far. As long you don’t let go of Kokone Kirino, that is.”*

*“Shut the fuck up!”*

*I watch Daiya Oomine roar, clenching his fists.*

*Why does that name come out of 'O's mouth...?*

*Why does Daiya Oomine react like this to that name?*

*Why does the name of my admired, docile Senpai make him suffer?*

*“-----Aah.”*

*I see. I remembered.*

*I remembered who Daiya Oomine was in the past.*

*“Do you really think you can achieve your goal? «No matter what you do, no matter where you go, you can't get away from your nature» - these are your very own words. Even if you put on piercings that symbolize your resolve, even if you could sever your feelings for her - your human kindness, cowardice and foolishness don't change.”*

*Daiya Oomine scowls at 'O' with a look that bears so much enmity, it could almost kill.*

*It's only natural that I couldn't remember. His impression back then was completely different. During middle school, he didn't have any piercings and had no silver hair yet. He was a softly smiling Senpai that was admired as the «prince» by the girls because of his coolness and refinement.*

*He was the perfect boyfriend --- of the docile girl I admired.*

*That's why I gave up on her right away. I didn't know Daiya Oomine well. It's just that I was convinced that Kirino-senpai would definitely be happier together with him. I was disabused that I wasn't the only one who had discovered her charm. And I also realized that I wouldn't*

*be the one to draw out that charm. My illusion that she was something special only for me crumbled down just like that.*

*I see.*

*So Daiya Oomine was the one who created the occasion that made me go out with «Rino» --- «Miyuki Karino».*

*“.....Heh.”*

*Daiya Oomine stopped scowling, relaxed his fists and contorted the shape of his mouth.*

*The smile that has appeared now that he has regained his composure doesn't have a bit of his former softness and looks only fearless.*

*“You may be right. But it doesn't matter.”*

*“Doesn't matter, huh? Even though you're going to suffer?”*

*“Yeah, I will achieve my goal no matter how much I need to suffer. I'm able to bear up against feelings of that level.”*

*‘O’ asks, seeming deeply interested,*

*“Why do you think so?”*

*“Because an even greater feeling than pain is driving me. My nature, as you call it, is painted over by that. That's how strong it is --- my hatred.”*

*He says, strongly.*

*“Since that time, «I»<sup>boku<sup>2</sup></sup> hate the everyday life.”*

*I don't have the slightest idea to what time he refers by ‘that time’.*

*“You delight me!”*

*But ‘O’ smiles contently after hearing Daiya Oomine's words.*

*“By letting me listen to your creaking heart like this. By letting me listen to it as easily as playing on an instrument where you only have to touch a single string.”*

*“Well, I guess that’s why you gave me the ‘box’. I won’t be unwilling, I’ll let you hear as much of it as you want! No matter how much my heart may creak, I will achieve my goal. Thus, I’m very grateful to you!”*

*“I’m delighted to hear that! Although I distribute ‘boxes’ that can grant any wish for free and give the receivers a proper explanation, there are many amongst them who seem to have a misplaced grudge against me.”*

*Having said this, ‘O’ lifts me up and restrains me again.*

*“Alright, Kazuki-kun is about to become a mummy. We have to hurry up.”*

*“That goes without saying.”*

*Daiya Oomine spits that out and rushes to me.*

*“Koudai Kamiuchi.”*

*He smiles coldly.*

*“Amongst all the people I know, you’re top-level trash. You’re the trash amongst trash, living a meaningless life, driven by boredom and hurting others. I don’t expect that you’ll change your mind, nor do I think that you will hand over the ‘box’.”*

*He reaches out for my neck.*

*“Like Kazuki Hoshino has changed, I will change, too. For that sake, I have to get rid of my weakness. So, let me use you for that.”*

---

2. *Boku: Daiya uses a different word here for “I”; typically he uses “ore” which is much more rude than “boku.”*

*He puts force into his hands and strangles me.*

*“I’ll cut my retreat by killing you.”*

*Then, the person who once was the «prince», says,*

*“And then I will become the «king».”*

*Man, don’t bother yourself telling me that! If you do, it sounds almost as if you say it to yourself.*

*.....Oh, or is he really saying that to himself?*

*Why did Daiya Oomine leave the ‘Game of Idleness’ unharmed for so long? Why didn’t he kill me right away? - There were several reasons. To understand the usage of the ‘box’. To wait for ‘O’. To change Kazuki Hoshino.*

*But if you look at it from the other side, doesn’t that just mean that he searched for so many reasons to postpone the determination to become a murderer?*

*Of course, that may be my misunderstanding. But I think it’s certain that he wanted to make himself believe that it’s alright to kill me. After all he’s still a «prince», not the «king».*

*My sight flickers.*

*I’m going to die.*

*I see, I’ve lost to him. ...no, I guess I’ve been losing the whole time already, before this incident. I’ve not only lost to Daiya Oomine, but to everyone and everything. I’ve been losing because I wasn’t even in the ring, ever since I started escaping.*

*My feet sink into this room that seems like the solidification of desire. Probably, I will melt and vanish if I keep sinking.*

*I unconsciously thought that such a thing might be Eden to me.*

*Am I an idiot?*

*What a lack of imagination. It seems to me like this only because I've never met with death before! Even without knowing what my desire ultimately is, I don't want to end like this!*

*Though I have no choice anymore but to accept.*

*So, I'll do at least one counterattack at the very end.*

*"Eh.....ph...e..."*

*I try to say one last sentence, but my strangled vocal cords don't form the words correctly anymore. But it doesn't matter. As long they reach him, they don't need to be exact.*

*Even if it's all as he expected, I'll at least pester him.*

*I look into his eyes.*

*I can see slight indecision in them.*

*Aah, looks like it reached him a bit.*

*«Help me.»*

*The intention of these words.*

*Of course that won't change the outcome.*

*But there's one thing I know. Having seen him laugh at Kirino-senpai's side when he still was a «prince», I know one thing.*

*You are the one who's going to lose from now on --- Daiya Oomine!*

*Or --- did you seriously think you were geared for becoming the «king»!*

*I feel that my body has been completely engulfed by the darkness. My sight has turned black as well, so I can't see anything. I can hear the echo of his voice in my head.*

*".....Kazu, do you really think you could have done better?"*

*He says with a trembling voice, apparently thinking that I've already lost consciousness.*

*"Even if I hadn't wanted to use Kamiuchi's death like this, I probably would have found no other way to stop the 'Game of Idleness'. But you would have found one?"*

*Of course I can't see his face anymore.*

*I feel something on my head. What is this? I can smell something sour.*

*Aah, I see... it's vomit.*

*Hey now, Daiya Oomine, you're overdoing it!*

*Well, I guess I'm the pot calling the kettle black. After all, I also scattered vomit all over the street on my way home after leaving Rino behind in that hotel. I really can't explain why I did that. But what's beyond doubt is that I was still suffering then.*

*And yet, when did violence start to become a pleasure?*

*I don't know. I don't know, so that means I'll likely never know.*

*I fall into the darkness.*

*But it's almost the same as the place I was in until now.*

*So, since when have I been engulfed by this darkness?  
Well, it's understandable that I was incredibly bored then,  
in such a place. I've been running around, raising my voice,  
reaching my hands out, but still I didn't find anyone and  
was exposed to fear.*

*But, if I had continued searching a bit, maybe I would  
have been able to come into contact with someone?*

*---heh.*

*Nope.*

*After all, even my mother left me.*

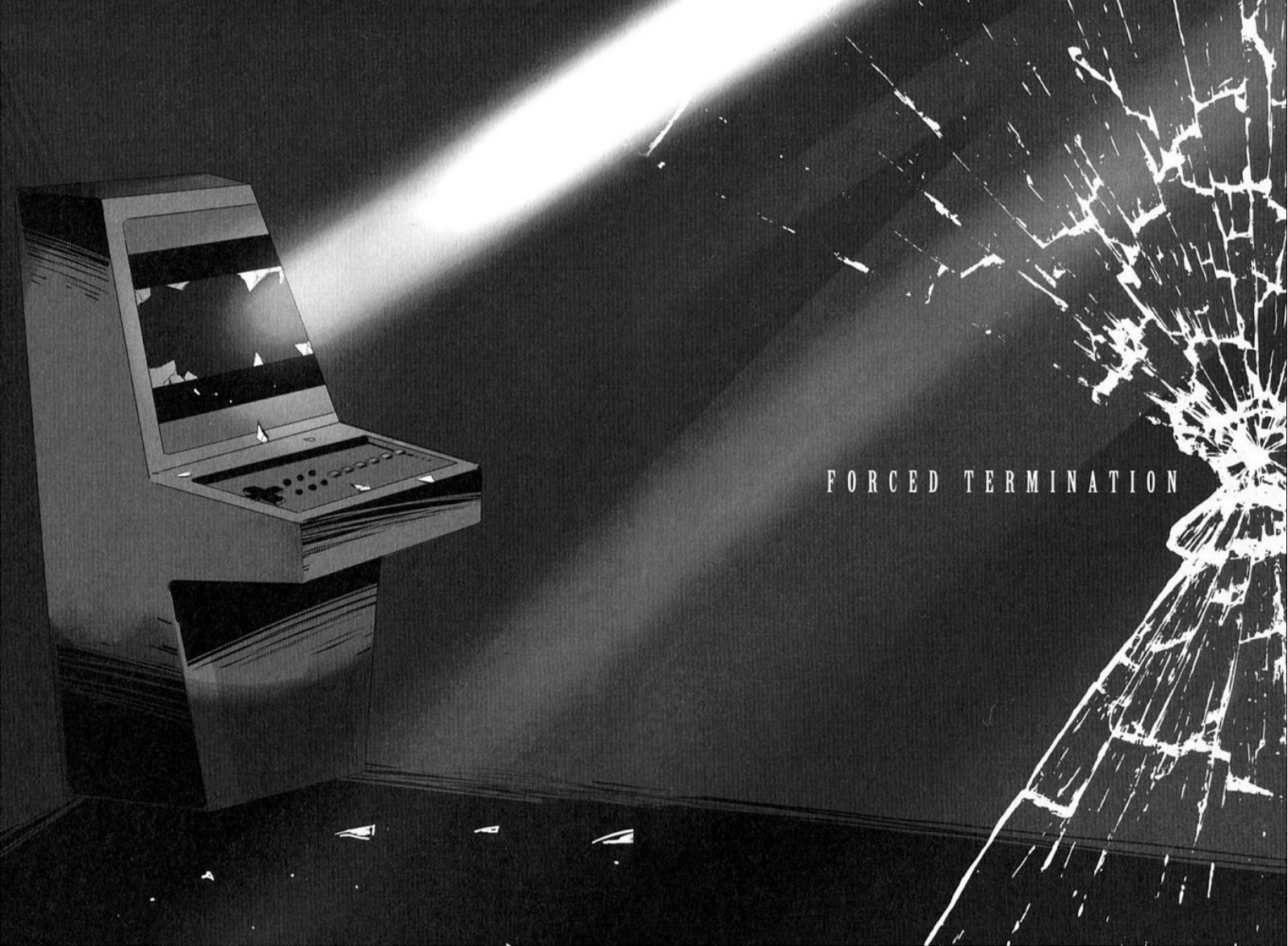


*For some reason, Kazuki Hoshino is the last thing I think  
of.*

*I ask one last question.*

*Hey, if you had been the one here---*

*---would you have told me what my true 'wish' is?*



FORCED TERMINATION

Because it had rained the day before, Koudai Kamiuchi's funeral was held under humid and uncomfortable circumstances.

It was so hot and humid that even the attendees were visibly affected, and seemed more uncomfortable than mournful. They almost seemed to have forgotten that they were there to mourn for the deceased.

There were still many attendees who shed tears at the funeral. From my conversations with them, I got a sense of Kamiuchi-kun's popularity. I only knew his ruthless side, so I was surprised at first. After taking into account his outwardly friendly behavior, I felt a little less surprised.

One young woman, apparently his mother, cried so hard that every last tear in her body seemed to be coming out.

Seeing her was heart-wrenching.

Somewhere deep within my own heart, I wanted to ignore the mourners and ease my own suffering. I wanted to justify his death by telling myself he was a hopeless cause anyway.

But naturally, even a man like Kamiuchi-kun remained dear to some people.

What Daiya and I had done was terrible, and I shared the responsibility for this terrible result as well.

Of course.

Daiya may have strangled him, but I also killed Koudai Kamiuchi.

Kamiuchi-kun's mother kept whispering that it was her fault, though she was clearly not the culprit who had strangled him. She seemed to be trying to curse herself to unhappiness through her frantic claims.

In his funerary portrait, Kamiuchi-kun had slightly narrowed eyes and the corners of his mouth were raised. Regardless, the smile in his photo just didn't seem like a true smile.

Standing next to me, Maria saw the look on my face and asked, "...did you know him?" Without hesitation, I shook my head and answered, "not at all." Maria was very silent and mourned for him sincerely, though she'd barely ever spoken with him. When we went to a café afterwards, she didn't even finish her strawberry tart.

I'm happy that Maria doesn't remember the 'Game of Idleness'. If she did, she would surely feel responsible for his death and blame herself.

--- the 'Game of Idleness', huh.

One could almost think Kamiuchi-kun had mastered his 'box'. But that wasn't the case. Just like Mogi-san and Asami-san, who thought their 'wish' could never come true and hence couldn't truly fulfill their 'wish', he had also failed to truly master his 'box'. One might even say that his was the greatest failure.

After all, the 'wish' behind the 'Game of Idleness' consisted of nothing but resignation.

So, I wonder, what was his true 'wish'?

I've been pondering and pondering... but nothing comes to mind.

I didn't get the chance to truly understand him, so I'll never know.

But after seeing his funeral portrait, I came to a conclusion.

Probably, Kamiuchi-kun was---  
Lonely.



The day before summer vacation arrived with Daiya still MIA.

The new murder incident caused another school-wide uproar, but I guess that will cool down by the end of vacation.

This bad aftertaste will probably recur forever in my own mind. I've come to accept it; I gave my tacit approval to this outcome, after all.

Anyway, summer vacation starts tomorrow.

".....alright!"

Let's shake off this melancholic mood!

I ignore the unpleasant feeling of my sweaty skin sticking to my shirt, smile, and enter the classroom.

".....Mh?"

For some reason Kokone is cowering in a corner. She's sitting there embracing her knees and squirms.

...what is she doing there?

"Morning, Hoshii!"

“Good morning, Haruaki. ...hey, do you know what’s up with Kokone?”

“Aah, that’s Kiri’s usual ‘play with me’-illness, so just ignore her! But these annoying vibes you get from seeing her cling to herself in the corner of the room make her seem entirely like that certain black living thing! Let’s call her Kirino Cockroane from now on!”

“Who’s a cockroach!?”

Ah, she heard everything.

She turns around and scowls at us. Her hairstyle of the day has been involves a hair clip, exposing the nape of her neck. And also---

“Ah, glasses.”

She is wearing glasses with a blue frame.

For some reason, Kokone winces at this word and curls up again.

“Usually I use disposable contacts... but I forgot to buy new ones. Hah... glasses don’t suit me at all, so I feel so down...”

“...and you’re sitting in the corner because of that?”

“Yeah. I don’t want to show anyone my face. Uguu.”

I think doing that just makes her stand out even more, though.

Well, judging from her expression she seems to be quite serious about not wanting to be seen wearing glasses. Personally, I think that from time to time a pair of glasses is fine too, but I guess that’s just the way a woman’s heart works?

“Don’t worry, they suit you!”

“They don’t! Have your eyes rotted?! If your vision’s gotten that bad, *you* should put on some glasses right now, Kazu-kun! Ah, or are your eyes blind with love for me?! Good grief, you little deredere<sup>3</sup> rascal!”

“...no, not at all...”

“How dare you say ‘not at all,’ you crossdresser! You’d better take an interest in me!”

Isn’t that a bit too cruel?! I mean, it’s her own fault that she’s so depressed in the first place...

“Come on Hoshii, tell her what you’re actually thinking straight-out! Tell her that «Not only me, but the entire world population has no interest in you»!”

Haruaki says such unnecessary things...

“Mh! What did you just say, Haru!”

“I stated that neither Hoshii nor anyone else has interest in you.”

“Ah, so it was just a roundabout confession.”

“.....how in the world did you arrive at that kind of conclusion?”

“You just wish it were like that, don’t you? The translation of your Tsundere<sup>4</sup>-confession goes like this: «The oh-so popular Kokone-sama must be the center of attention of the entire world... I wish I was the only one

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3. deredere means “being all lovey dovey about someone.”

4. Tsundere (ツンデレ) is a Japanese character development process that describes someone who is initially cold or even hostile towards another individual, before gradually warming to that individual over time. See Wikipedia for more details.

that had an interest in her...». Well, it can't be helped. Because of your love, let me present you with a used oil-absorbent paper afterwards! Be sure to treasure it."

"I'll burn that thing with a lighter right away! It'll burn like crazy, after all. Jeez... your self-love sure knows no bounds. I bet even the sound of an opening door sounds like a confession to you, right, Kiri?"

"Well, I can't say you're wrong. Since I'm loved by the entire world, it's not a lie to say that every sound in this world is an expression of love for me! .....Aah, but I'm not loved by the entire world while I'm wearing glasses... at most, I'll only be loved throughout Japan..."

That's more than enough!

"Uuh... why do I have to wear such ugly glasses on the day of Kasumi's visit...?"

"Eh?"

Did she just say something that I wasn't supposed to overhear...?

"Kasumi...? You mean Mogi-san? Is she coming to school today?"

When I ask her this, Kokone makes a face that obviously says «Shit!» and immediately shuts up. She looks away and puts on a wry smile.

"...Ahaah, I would never leak something Kasumi told me to keep quiet about! I wasn't told that «It's going to be a surprise, so please don't tell anyone, Koko-chan»! Err... Kasumi is... Ah, right! Kasumi no Tamoto---in other words it's about a hermit!"

I've never heard of that word before...

“Your vocabulary is quite extensive, isn’t it, Kokone? ...by the way, what kind of hermit is that?”

“E-err... a hermit that puts quail eggs on his hand and breaks them with a nunchaku.”

What’s scary is that such a hermit could even exist...  
...anyway. Looks like I have to practice looking surprised.

Still... I’m really happy that I’ll see Mogi-san at school today.



Even after the closing ceremony there’s still no sign of Mogi-san.

Maybe she’ll come right at the end of school so we can hang out afterwards?

While thinking about Mogi-san and idly watching my classmates – noisily jabbering about their plans for the holidays and their grades -- my name was called.

“Kazuki-san.”

The call came from Yuuri-san, who was peeking in from the corridor.

When our eyes meet, she smiled broadly. Her cheeks are slightly red, probably because she rushed right over as soon as her homeroom ended.

...I wonder what’s up?

As I stand up, that question still floating around in my mind, someone put his hand on my shoulder.

“...Mh? What’s wrong, Haruaki? Umm, Yuuri-san is calling me, so I have to go...”

Haruaki nods and smiles.

“Mh mh, I see. You call her «Yuuri-san».”

“...eh?”

“You know... I know that you talk with her from time to time, but how should I put it? This is a critical point.”

“Aah... but, listen, Yuuri-san is---”

“As the representative for all the guys in our class, let me state our consensus.”

The hand on my shoulder grips me even more tightly.

“Get bent.”

He crushes my family jewels between my legs with his left hand.

“GYAAAAH!”

It-It’s going to be crushed!

Though I haven’t done anything bad!

But then I notice that the cold gazes of my classmates have softened a bit.

...Honestly, I have mixed feelings about what just happened, but I am a little bit relieved. Since that confession incident with Kokone, this kind of topic is pretty dangerous for me. The rest of the class doesn’t mind Maria because they recognize that she lives in another dimension, but Yuuri-san... isn’t so far out of reach.

Maybe Haruaki did this on purpose to protect me from the envy and hatred of the guys in my class? ...Nahhhh, probably not. I mean, it's Haruaki. And he didn't restrain himself. And it really hurts. And it's seriously cruel to do that!

I stagger to the corridor while holding my crotch.

"A-Are you alright?"

Yuuri-san worriedly looks back and forth between my face and my crotch.

"M-Maybe... probably... surely... I should be alright... Err... I'm happy about your concern for my crotch, but what's up?"

Yuuri-san turns red like a tomato.

"'C-Concern for your crotch'... don't say such strange things!"

I didn't!

"U-Umm... there's something I want to discuss with you. Can you accompany me for a moment?"

"Mh... I don't mind, but can't we do it here?"

"No."

A serious subject, I guess....

"Okay. I'll come with you."

"Thank you. Please follow me."

She starts to walk, but because my pain is still intense, I stagger after her. Yuuri-san notices my strange walk right away and stops.

"A-Are you really alright?"

Saying that, she bends down a little and looks at my crotch. No... I don't think you can do anything just by looking...

Then, I notice.

"HII!"

Maria is right there.

Maria probably headed to classroom 2-3 right after homeroom as well.

And now Maria is, fixedly, watching Yuuri-san scrutinize my crotch.

Then, she turns her half-opened eyes to me.

...Oh. Maybe this is quite bad after all...

"D-Don't get it wrong, Maria! Yuuri-san simply worried for me, so..."

"Why are you trying to come up with a strange excuse? I know you well. Most likely you got attacked by Usui because he got jealous after seeing her come to your classroom, right?"

She hit the nail on the head perfectly, almost as if she witnessed it herself, so I nod repeatedly.

"But, with that in mind, let me tell you this..."

Maria says,

"Get unmanned."

WHY!?

Escaping from Maria's cold gaze, we walked to the stairway landing between the third floor and the rooftop.

After confirming that we're alone, Yuuri-san bows deeply.

"Thank you so much."

"Err...?"

What is she thanking me for?

Yuuri-san seems to have noticed my confusion and adds,

"For helping to reconcile me and Iroha."

Aah... that. Well, yeah.



[Kingdom Royale] ended abruptly, like a paper balloon trampled by an elephant. Right afterwards, I found myself in my pajamas on my bed.

The first thing I did was check the time and date. Even though we had spent so much time in the game, only a few hours had passed.

Without wallowing in my complex mix of feelings, I called Maria. I wanted to confirm as soon as possible that she really had no memory of the 'Game of Idleness'.

I immediately realized that she didn't remember anything when she answered the phone with "What is it?" in an unusually deep voice.

I was so relieved that I couldn't respond. Then Maria got angry with me because of my sudden, wordless phone call in the wee hours of the morning. I had to

laugh because this was such typical Maria-like behavior, and she got even angrier, again saying, “Why are you laughing on top of making me angry!”

And as soon I confirmed that she had no memories of the ‘Game of Idleness’, I immediately thought of Yuuri-san and Iroha-san.

I couldn’t sleep that night, and looked for them at school the next morning. But I couldn’t find them. Both of them had skipped school.

---Maybe they wouldn’t come to school anymore.

Because of my concerns, I begged their teachers for their addresses while incurring their suspicions, and was able to visit them.

Their conditions were horrible.

Yuuri-san suddenly started crying in response to the tiniest of matters. Iroha-san punched holes in the walls of her room and randomly started shouting from time to time.

But I somehow managed to assess their current state anyway.

They had forgotten about the existence of the ‘box’, but they could clearly remember what they had done. They hadn’t had a [vicarious experience] of the last game when I was the player, so they couldn’t remember. That seemed to be their current state.

Yuuri-san only had memories up until the second game when she deceived everyone. Iroha-san only had memories up until the third game when she killed everyone. Neither of them remembered their reconciliation.

My appearance seemed to make them even more unstable. Well, that was probably inevitable since I must have reminded them of that game.

I also thought that it might be best for me to keep away from them entirely and allow them to recover naturally.

But in the end, that didn't seem right to me either.

I was the only one they could talk to about that incident. Sure, their condition would improve if time passed. But they wouldn't be able to truly recover that way.

I had to make them understand that their actions were inevitable. It was true that they had exposed the ugly sides of their personalities in that game. I could understand why they had trouble forgiving themselves.

But at least I forgave them.

That's for sure.

I kept visiting them for a week. One time, I was about to be chased away by Iroha-san's family, but Iroha-san herself stopped them. Yuuri-san's mother welcomed me, although she didn't understand what was going on.

It was almost completely one-sided, but I kept talking to them. I kept telling them about the last game when I was the player.

I could vaguely feel it:

That as soon their relationship recovered, they would have freed themselves of the ‘Game of Idleness’. They would have won against the ‘box’.

Therefore, I wanted them to completely rebuild that friendship they had shown me in the last game.

I don’t know how much my frequent visits that week helped them, if at all. But they’ve started to come to school again.

Iroha-san just greets me cursorily when we meet, but Yuuri-san has started to visit me frequently during breaks to chat.

Neither of them believes that they reconciled in the last round.

Fair enough. Unlike the situation in the last round, their relationship was completely destroyed. It’s not easy to repair something starting from that point.

But I believe in them nonetheless.

I believe that they can once again trust each other.

After all, I know how dear they are to each other.



“...have you talked to Iroha-san already?”

Yuuri-san shakes her head slowly and bluntly answers, “No.”

“...Yeah, I guess it’s not easy.”

She just smiles at my words.

“I sure envy Otonashi-san.”

“...right, because she doesn’t remember the game.”

“But that’s not all,” Yuuri-san says with a smile.

“I’m a little jealous because you appreciate her the most, Kazuki-san.”

Yuuri-san suddenly starts to cry. It’s really sudden, and she can’t seem to control her tears either, which further confuses her. Since the end of [Kingdom Royale], Yuuri-san randomly sheds tears as if some internal faucet has been broken. There are no traces left of the girl who used to be a pro at controlling her own tears.

Since I’ve gotten used to her constant crying jags, I no longer lose my composure in response.

Even as she smiles, Yuuri-san tells me:

“Uhehe, I’m crying again already...”

But there’s nothing dark in her expression.

“I really do envy her. Because Otonashi-san is so dear to you, that’s also why she has no memories of the game, isn’t it? Because you gave your all to protecting Otonashi-san, she didn’t have to become a player and get hurt in the process.”

“.....Maybe.”

I guess my efforts weren’t futile after all.

“She really is...”

She whispers and flashes a smile while wiping her tears away with a tissue.

I smile as well, relieved by her expression.

“Ah, you’re smiling!”

“Mh? ...Well, yeah.”

“Because you saw my tears? Umm, you can lick them if you want to, you know?”

...Huh? Did she just say something weird?

“You have a tear-fetish, don’t you?”

“.....did I ever tell you about that?”

“You did. You said you get sexually aroused by licking people’s tears or something like that.”

I definitely haven’t said anything like that! And where does she get off suddenly talking about sexual arousal?! And what happened to her innocent personality?!

“Tear-fetish, huh. You’re quite a pervert, aren’t you?♥”

“W-Why are you teasing me even now!?”

“Eh? Don’t you have a preference for girls that do with you as they please? Like Otonashi-san.”

“That’s a terrible misunderstanding! That reputation is always bothering me!”

“So you even have to act like you don’t really want it in order to get aroused... this is getting serious...”

“W-What are you talking about?! Your personality wasn’t like this before!”

“Mh! I... I know! But what should I do?! I have to practice teasing you!”

Now she’s even firing back!

“But it’s quite funny to tease you...”

This conversation is definitely going downhill.

“Ahaha. Well, let’s move on to the matter I called on you about.”

“Eh? Didn’t you just want to say thanks?”

Yuuri-san shakes her head charmingly.

“I have a request.”

“A request?”

“Yes. I’m still unstable and haven’t completely recovered, so I’ll be troubled if you stop visiting me from time to time. It would be problematic if you didn’t visit anymore once summer vacation starts, so I wanted to request this from you in advance.”

“...aah... okay, I’ll come visit!”

“Please come alone because we’ll talk about that game. You can’t bring Otonashi-san with you, okay?”

“.....Mh?”

This conversation is somehow moving in a strange direction.

“Ah, one more thing. Yesterday, my mom asked me about you, «Is that boy who visits you all the time your boyfriend?»!”

“.....How did you answer?”

“I just giggled embarrassedly «Uhehe».”

“So she’s misunderstood for sure!”

“I know?”

“Eeeeh! What’s with that «Please don’t state the obvious»-ish answer?!”

Her character has changed too much... or, maybe she just became so frank with me because I’ve seen her true self in the game...

“...you’re quite bold, aren’t you, Yuuri-san?”

“Uhehe, did you only now notice? I won’t give up so easily, you know? No matter how strongly your feelings are inclined towards Otonashi-san.”

“...Umm, I was repeatedly deceived by you, you know? It won’t be that easy to mess with me anymore.”

“Ahaha, you reap what you sow, I suppose. But there are still ways for me to get what I want, even though you know about my calculating nature. Right now it seems like all my actions are intended to attract you, right?”

Yuuri-san softly touches my hand.

My heart automatically skips a beat from a girl’s touch.

“Your heart beats faster although you know of my schemes, doesn’t it?”

I hate to admit it, but she’s right.

“I will try hard to win you over like this!”

She then brings her mouth to my ear and whispers,

“I’ll make you think that my frantic efforts look cute.”

As planned by Yuuri-san, my face turns red. Uah... why am I so easy to manipulate...

But I smile wryly.

Looks like she’s going to be all right.

Yuuri-san walks away from me and starts to embarrassedly climb down the stairs.

“By the way, it seems that Iroha and that boy have been getting on well together recently! The boy she’s always been in love with, that is,” Yuuri-san says as she descends.

“...eh? Even though Iroha-san has a lot of other problems on her mind right now?”

“Because of them, actually. Since she’s gotten weaker, she doesn’t seem so perfect anymore! And that’s cute.”

Come to think of it, Kamiuchi-kun also said that self-reliant girls aren’t cute.

Yuuri-san arrives at the bottom of the staircase and turns around.

“Um, it may have sounded like a joke, but really, come to my house, please. I’ll be waiting.”

“Okay. Honestly speaking, you’ve just frightened me a little, but I’ll come. After all, I really am worried about you.”

“Uhehe... Ah, I’ll clear my schedule anytime if you just give me a call, but today I have an important appointment. Sorry.”

“Hmm, what kind of appointment?”

Still smiling, Yuuri-san turns her back to me.

“I told you earlier that I haven’t talked with Iroha yet, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s true, but actually we sent each other email. Right before I called on you.”

I’m surprised.

Does that mean---

Yuuri-san turns around again and says,

“Today I have an appointment with my dear friend.”

With a bright smile, she speaks the words I have longed for.

Aah... indeed, she was telling the truth when she said that they haven't talked yet.



By the time I returned to the classroom, covering my grin with my hand, a crowd has formed inside.

Some of them have sparkling eyes, some of them wet eyes, but they are all smiling.

What's up? - I only wonder about that for a second.

---Ah, I see.

I immediately recognize the person in the center.

...geez, if Kokone hadn't said unnecessary things, I would have been able to be deeply moved...

While blaming her in my mind, I make my way through the crowd. An unfamiliar metallic frame and tire tubes come into view. And---

“-----”

I take that back.

I'm glad I knew beforehand.

If I had seen her without knowing anything, I might have broken out in tears.

“Mogi-san...”

Mogi-san, in her uniform, is in the classroom.

My voice shakes just by that, even though I've been occasionally visiting her in the hospital.

“Hoshino-kun.”

Mogi-san notices and smiles at me.

“Were you discharged already?”

“No, no. I merely got permission to go out. I can’t live on my own yet. I was allowed to come after school and was brought to the classroom by my mom. Well, I can’t do anything on my own, I guess.”

She says that with a smile so that it doesn’t sound too depressive.

“But I wanted to meet you even if I had to put myself to some bother.”

Kokone grins and asks, “Who does this «you» refer to~?” upon which the flustered Mogi-san raises her voice, “T-To everyone!”

The surrounding students start to laugh just by that.

“What’s tha~t, everyone, teasing me although it’s been a while. ...ah, Hoshino-kun, let’s talk a bit closer.”

“While telling us not to tease you, you don’t even try to hide your affection, huh.”

“S-Shut up, Koko-chan!”

I approach Mogi-san as she told me. I open my mouth, thinking that I have to say something.

“...looks cool.”

“Eh?”

“Your wheelchair.”

“Why on earth do you tell me your impressions of my wheelchair with that timing? If it’s about looks, there’s something else you should praise!”

I was rebuked by Mogi-san...

Looks, huh... I look at Mogi-san a bit closer. Apparently she’s a bit embarrassed being watched like that, because she blushes slightly.

Come to think of it, her physique has mostly returned to how it used to be.

“You gained weight, didn’t you?”

“.....I know what you mean, but no girl would be happy about those words, Hoshino-kun!”

The surroundings laugh again.

“Eh, err, what should I say, then...?”

“You ask *me*... not that I mind... umm, look, how about addressing my clothes?”

“Ah, yeah. Don’t worry - I noticed.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I was wondering how you like it, seeing it after a long time...”

Her school uniform seems to be brand new. It also looks like the length of her skirt became quite a bit longer. Probably because one could... umm... see *it* otherwise when she’s on the wheelchair.

But what should I say? I can’t praise that she’s taking care that no one can see her panties, after all.

Mh, well, I’ll dodge the question.

“Looks cute!”

“...Eh?”

Mogi-san widens her eyes. ...Huh? That’s a different reaction from what I expected. I’ll try again, just in case.

“You look cute in uniform!”

Mogi-san blushes to the roots of her hair.

She even averts her gaze and punches me softly.

Uuh...? I guess Maria would just say “So what?”, Kokone would throw out her (E-cup) chest pridefully, “Of course!”, and my big sis Luu-chan would act like she wouldn’t want to know though she asked for it herself. So what is this reaction? That’s a new pattern.

Suddenly, Haruaki puts his hand on my shoulder.

“I see. So that’s how you do it.”

“Huh?”

“Did you hear, my ladies? The trick of this man is to say such things without being embarrassed! Many females, starting with Miss Maria, have fallen for this natural philanderer due to this trick!”

What’s with that way of talking.

But for some reason, the male students of my class nod deeply to Haruaki’s performance and send me cold glances. What’s with you guys, you’re scary!

“The philanderer Kazuki Hoshino has to be punished with the maximum penalty! We shall punish you by thrusting socks in your mouth that have been worn by Kiri for a whole three days! This is truly the maximum penalty!”

“How is that a penalty!” Kokone objects. “That’s rather a reward!”

“I heard they’re deadly, really. And I also heard the theory that the poisonous substance called «trikokonethylene» emerges in the process.”

“T-That’s not possible. NPO requested my support because they can produce actin with my socks that saves the children in Africa!”

Wow, where is this going?

But my mouth relaxes unintentionally.

Although Mogi-san's sitting in a wheelchair right now, nothing has changed from the time when she used to be here. She's still popular while Kokone and Haruaki still fool around.

It's like I've returned to the past.

“.....”

---Like I've returned to the past?

I reflexively look around in the classroom.

Return to the past? Why is that possible?

Something like that shouldn't be possible.

In a classroom without Daiya Oomine, that shouldn't be possible.

I look at Kokone. She is laughing joyfully.

I notice something.

Right.

Maria isn't here, either.

“...Mh? What's wrong, Hoshino-kun?”

...I wonder what this uneasy feeling is.

Unlike Daiya, Maria's merely not here right now. I guess she considered it hard to join our nostalgic conversation and either went back to her own classroom or just went home ahead of us.

That's all. It should be.

And yet I can't get rid of this uneasy feeling. It even gets worse. My chest feels almost as if something seized my heart.

“.....Mogi-san.”

“Mh?”

“Sorry, but I need to go out for a bit.”

“Eh?”

Mogi-san widens her eyes.

“What’s up Hoshii, going to take a dump?”

“No! It’s just that Maria---”

---I have the feeling that I have to go meet Maria.

But I don’t finish my sentence.

Because of Mogi-san.

Because Mogi-san’s happy expression has changed into another one.

“...I’m sorry, Mogi-san.”

“.....Eh? Why do you apologize? Umm... it’s not like you’re leaving... right?”

“I’m sorry.”

“.....You know... I’ll have to go back to the hospital shortly, so I have no time, you know? Let’s be together until then? Please?”

“...I’ll come back if possible.”

When she hears these words she didn’t wish for, her eyes become wet.

“Why?”

She asks in a shaking voice.

“Can’t you stay here? You can meet Otonashi-san anytime, can’t you? Do you not even see me off, although I went through all this trouble to meet you?”

It’s not like I don’t feel bad, accused by her sad voice and her expression.

Maria's just not here right now. I just have to hold down my urge to rush to her. There's no need to randomly hurt Mogi-san's feelings.

So can't I just stay here for her?

"-----"

But I have decided.

To protect Maria above everything else.

Therefore---

"Sorry!"

I rush out of the classroom.

Ignoring the voice that tries to stop me.



I couldn't reach Maria over the phone.

Maria ignores the school rules and usually comes to school on a motorcycle which she parks somewhere in the vicinity of the school. But her bike was already not there anymore.

Even though she usually waits for me.

After confirming that the bike wasn't there anymore, I immediately proceeded to the station.

While being irritated at the slowness of the train, I realize the origin of my uneasiness.

I'm deceiving Maria. I haven't told her about the 'Game of Idleness' and act as if I didn't know Koudai Kamiuchi.

And I haven't told her that 'O' may have lost his interest in me, either.

Therefore I'm always, unconsciously, thinking this:

Maria might suddenly disappear one day.

Probably, I became unable to suppress this uneasiness when I saw Mogi-san in her uniform.

Back then when Mogi-san was normally in our classroom, Maria wasn't here yet. She wasn't part of my everyday life yet. And that's not all. Just like I have changed due to Koudai Kamiuchi's 'box', Maria has changed due to Kasumi Mogi's 'box'.

Mogi-san and Maria form a set, like the two sides of a coin.

That's why I think like this, without any basis:

By the time Mogi-san returns, Maria might already be gone.

“.....”

I shift my thoughts to Daiya and Kokone.

Daiya has disappeared. And yet, Kokone's not worrying about it at all. Daiya should be quite an important person for Kokone, but she just got a bit angry because he suddenly disappeared. That's all.

Why is that?

I try constructing a hypothesis.

---Perhaps, Kokone had a presentiment that Daiya would disappear one day?

Of course I don't think she expected him to disappear like that. She shouldn't know about the 'boxes'.

But maybe she did know that he would remove himself from her?

Maybe she did know Daiya's goal?

Hence, she gave up the thought that he could return so soon.

Because she was already prepared for Daiya to disappear.

I don't know what happened between them. Therefore, it's wrong to think that Kokone's cold for apparently accepting Daiya's disappearance.

But I'm not like Kokone. While knowing Maria's goal, while knowing that she's going to disappear, I won't give up.

I will definitely not let Maria go for her selfish reasons.

I arrive at the apartment complex Maria lives in.

When I try to enter, I immediately remember that one doesn't even get through the entrance as long as the occupant of the room's not here. I can't even arrive at the elevator like this.

What should I do?

I nervously walk about. I exert all the proper reason that's still left in me and take out my mobile phone.

I type in her number by heart and initiate the call. The signal tone sounds. Each time I hear this sound, I pray, «Please answer!»

Then---

«What is it?»

Maria's voice.

“-----”

Aah---

Even though I heard her voice just a short while ago, even though it's her usual frank tone, I haven't even the composure to answer her.

«Hey? What's wrong? Are you trying to make a silent phone call though you haven't even hidden your number?»

“T-That's not it!”

I finally manage to speak.

“I'm in front of your apartment complex right now. Can you open the door?”

«What? Well, I don't mind... but why didn't you tell me in adva--- aah, you did. I'm sorry. I didn't notice because I was riding my bike.»

“No problem. Anyway, I'll come up, so please open the door.”

«Aah.»

The call gets terminated and the door opens.

I head towards the elevator, almost breaking into a run. I can't calm down even while I'm waiting for the elevator and riding in it.

When I arrive at the fourth floor, I rush to the room with the number «403» even though it's not that far.

I ring the chime upon which the door opens.

Maria's face appears in the gap of the opening door.

Just that is enough.

I rush toward her into the room, already before the door's fully opened.

"...what's wrong, Kazuki?"

Maria is surprised by my strange behavior.

"Maria... why did you go home ahead of me without notice?"

"...I went home early because I feel uneasy around Mogi, of course. Why are you so beside yourself? And why are *you* so early? Are you alright with not talking a bit longer with Mogi?"

"Yeah, I'm alright with that!"

I say.

"You're the most important to me, Maria."

Maria widens her eyes even more---

But then they become soft again.

"I see."

Then, she gently brushes my head.

"Geez... you've been acting strange recently!"

Maria has noticed my change just a little.

"That's just you."

Therefore, I falsify.

I softly stroke her long hair in return.

But the embarrassed smile she flashes seems lonely to me somehow, which feels mortifying after all.

## Author's Notes

Hello, I'm Eiji Mikage.

This is the fourth volume of «Hakomari!» (I like the way that sounds) and the final arc of the 'Game of Idleness'.

If you read those two volumes, I hope you can understand why I didn't call them «3(1)» and «3(2)»?

Aah, and let me apologize. I wrote «the next volume should come out in Spring» in the third volume, but it's already become June. I'm really sorry... I'll try to improve!

Alright, I want to talk a little about the story this time.

While writing the fourth volume, there was something that surprised me as author.

All the [classes] of the last round were the best matches for the images of the corresponding characters.

To tell the truth, I didn't do it on purpose. I mainly allotted the [classes] to maximize the drama, so it wasn't all that important to me whether the [classes] matched their images or not.

But in the end it happened automatically.

I think this wasn't a coincidence. I think that this part became only visible in the final product as a result of thoroughly elaborating the story.

It feels good to work out a story that exceeds superficial understanding.

On to the thank-you note:

Thanks again to Tetsuo-san for the illustrations. These may sound like honeyed words by now, but I really think it must be hard to draw pictures that look charming while still matching my work.

Thanks to my new editor in charge, Miki-san, for his support – including his sharp instructions. It may be hard to deal with me and my special writing style, but I look forward to working with you again.

Alright, the time until the fifth volume comes out might become a little longer than usual. In return, this may be a bit wrong for me to say, but I'll be participating in a certain project this summer, so try reading it if you like<sup>5</sup>. Due to various circumstances I can't use the pen name «Eiji Mikage», but I'm sure that readers of this series will have no trouble recognizing it!

See you some other time!

## Comments

### Eiji Mikage

I live in Saitama. I chew gum while writing. I'm so bad at it that I sometimes chew my tongue along with my gum.

5. 魔界探偵冥王星Oー ToyボックスのT (Makai Tantei Meiousei O - Toy Box no T)

**Tetsuo**

I never have the slightest idea of what to write here each time.

Please contact me if you have a good idea.

But I'm also bad at typing E-mails. I'm so \ (^o^) /  
screwed!